

Understanding Violence, Memory, and Resistance in Latin America

Francesco Davide Ragno

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM – UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

Fulvia Zega

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI GENOVA

Violence and Politics in Contemporary Latin America delves into the ongoing and multifaceted relationship between political violence, authoritarian regimes, and the processes of memory and resistance across Latin America. This dossier explores how violence—both overt and symbolic—has been a tool for maintaining and extending political control in the region, focusing on the latter half of the 20th century and the early decades of the 21st century. The essays presented here critically engage with the idea that violence is not merely an act of repression but also a systematic force that shapes political environments, allowing authoritarian regimes to sustain power while delegitimizing opposition. At the heart of this dossier is the understanding that violence, in its most varied forms, is deeply embedded in the political culture and historical memory of Latin America, creating not just spaces of fear but also frameworks for identity construction, social control, and political resistance.

Violence in Latin America, as explored throughout this dossier, is not confined to physical acts of repression. Rather, it extends into the cultural, symbolic, and institutional realms, where it manifests as forced disappearances, censorship, and the systematic delegitimization of political opponents. These practices, often invisible to the broader public, serve to control both the body and the mind—shaping national narratives, erasing dissenting voices, and cultivating a collective fear of political activism. Yet, as much as violence has been a tool for the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, it has also been met with resistance.

This dossier examines how social movements, intellectuals, and marginalized communities have fought back against the violence of the State, often in the form of cultural and political resistance, challenging the official narratives and striving to reclaim their voices. There is no doubt that this subject engages multiple domains across the political, social, and human sciences—areas of inquiry whose complexity can scarcely be captured within a single dossier. Our aim, therefore, is to gather a range of scholarly contributions and perspectives, without claiming to provide an exhaustive account.

In addressing these issues, *Violence and Politics in Contemporary Latin America* is structured to offer a nuanced understanding of the relationship between political violence, memory, and resistance. It adopts a transnational approach, connecting various case studies across Latin America and exploring how similar tactics of political violence have been used across different countries. The theme of memory—its creation, manipulation, contestation, and instrumentalization—emerges as a central thread throughout the dossier. Understanding the manipulation of historical narratives and the shaping of collective memory is crucial to understanding the persistent legacies of violence that continue to haunt the region.

The dossier begins with an exploration of the historical roots of political violence in Latin America. Authoritarian regimes that rose to power during the mid-20th century often relied on violence not just to suppress opposition but also to construct powerful national narratives. These regimes created and solidified the image of the "enemy," using violence to legitimize their rule and justify their actions to the public. The first essay by Francesco Davide Ragno focuses on the more contemporary use of violence in populist regimes in Latin America. Focusing on the regimes of, *inter alia*, Fujimori in Peru, Menem and Kirchner in Argentina, and Chávez in Venezuela, Ragno explores how these leaders constructed the image of the "enemy" both socially and institutionally. Ragno highlights the dual role of violence—both physical and symbolic—used by these populist leaders to delegitimize their political opponents and reinforce their control. His essay provides a critical examination of how populist rhetoric, which frequently targets media, labour unions, and professional associations, uses violence not only as physical repression but also as a mechanism for framing political enemies as existential threats to national stability. The article sheds light on the strategic use of violence in populist politics and how it continues to affect Latin American politics even in post-dictatorship contexts.

As we transition into the next section of the dossier, the essays turn to the issue of memory and transitional justice in post-dictatorship societies. In countries where authoritarian regimes have left deep scars, the process of reckoning with the past is both painful and necessary. These transitional justice processes, while

aimed at achieving justice, are often complicated by the need to confront the traumatic histories of violence while striving to build a new political order. Laura Fotia's essay provides an in-depth analysis of the *Espacio de Memorias y Derechos Humanos* in El Salvador, a pivotal institution created to address the country's violent past through memory and justice. Fotia explores how Salvadoran memory politics have been influenced by national and transnational contexts, particularly drawing on Chile's *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* as a model for collective memory practices. Her essay is critical for understanding how post-dictatorship societies grapple with the legacies of violence and attempt to use memory as a tool for reconciliation and democratic transformation.

In the same vein, Sergio Rodríguez-Blanco and Violeta Santiago-Hernández focus on Mexico's recent struggles with gendered violence, particularly the forced disappearance of women, a phenomenon that has reached alarming proportions in the country. Their essay examines how gendered violence, particularly feminicide, has been both represented and memorialized through journalistic writing and photographic representation. The authors explore the role of emotional narratives, such as pain and indignation, in creating visibility for these forms of violence. They show how such narratives not only serve to raise awareness but also become platforms for resistance. Their work offers valuable insights into how memory and representation of gendered violence intersect with political activism, questioning the politics of memory in Mexico's fight against violence.

As the dossier progresses, the essays shift to the continuing legacies of authoritarian violence in the contemporary political landscape. The rise of populist and far-right ideologies in Latin America has been marked by the resurgence of authoritarian rhetoric and violence, often drawing on the legacies of previous military dictatorships. Luciano Aronne de Abreu situates the rise of Jair Bolsonaro within this historical context, arguing that his ascent to power represents a return to authoritarian governance, drawing heavily from Brazil's military dictatorship. Through a close analysis of Bolsonaro's rhetoric and political actions, Aronne de Abreu reveals how the language of division and exclusion, which has long been a characteristic of Brazilian authoritarianism, persists in the contemporary political climate. This essay provides a critical perspective on the ideological continuity between past and present authoritarian regimes, showing how Bolsonaro's rhetoric serves to legitimize violent actions and justify his attack on democratic institutions.

Luis Fernando Beneduzi adds to this discussion by focusing on the intensification of political polarization in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. His essay offers a historically grounded analysis of Bolsonaro's discourse, particularly the systematic framing of political adversaries not merely as

opponents, but as existential "enemies" of the nation. Drawing on comparisons with previous authoritarian moments in Brazilian history—most notably the Vargas Era (1937–1945) and the military dictatorship (1964–1985)—Beneduzi demonstrates how this antagonistic rhetoric revives patterns of exclusion, repression, and moral panic that were instrumental in legitimizing authoritarian power. Central to this analysis is the appropriation of the notion of the “just war” (*guerra justa*), a rhetorical device employed to frame political conflict as a moral and patriotic crusade against internal threats. Through this lens, Bolsonaro’s attacks on the left, the media, and civil society actors are cast as acts of national defence, rather than partisan aggression. Beneduzi highlights how this discursive strategy not only deepens social divisions but also normalizes the use of political violence as a legitimate tool in the preservation of a supposed moral order. By mapping these continuities, the essay underscores the dangerous resilience of authoritarian legacies in shaping Brazil’s contemporary political climate and the erosion of democratic norms under the guise of populist renewal.

Fernanda R. Abreu Silva further explores the role of military memory in shaping contemporary political discourse in Brazil, with particular attention to how the armed forces have constructed and disseminated their own narrative of the past. Drawing on a detailed analysis of articles published in the *Revista do Clube Militar*, her essay reveals the discursive strategies employed by military elites to legitimise the 1964 coup and the subsequent dictatorship as a “necessary” and “patriotic” intervention in defence of national order. Abreu Silva demonstrates how this form of institutional memory, far from being relegated to the past, actively resurfaces in contemporary debates—especially under Jair Bolsonaro’s administration, which has embraced and amplified pro-military rhetoric. Her analysis underscores how the *Revista do Clube Militar* functions not only as a repository of corporatist memory but also as a platform for political engagement, promoting a vision of national identity grounded in hierarchical authority, anti-communism, and moral conservatism. This militarized memory, Abreu Silva argues, has been instrumental in normalizing the continued participation of military figures in civilian governance and in shaping a broader culture of authoritarian nostalgia. The essay thereby illustrates how collective memory, when monopolized by powerful institutional actors, can serve as a tool of ideological reproduction and political influence in Brazil’s fragile democratic landscape.

Finally, Stefano Martinelli focuses on the role of universities as critical sites of intellectual resistance under the authoritarian regimes of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile from the 1960s to the 1990s. His essay offers a comparative and transnational perspective on how academic institutions were targeted by military regimes not only for their potential to mobilize dissent, but also for embodying alternative

epistemologies and democratic values. Drawing on archival research and case studies from across the Southern Cone, Martinelli illustrates how universities were systematically subjected to purges, censorship, surveillance, and structural reforms designed to suppress critical thought and dismantle autonomous spaces of debate. Yet, rather than disappearing, dissent often reconfigured itself within the very constraints imposed by the regimes. Through informal networks, underground publishing, and alliances with social movements and ecclesiastical actors, university communities—comprising students, professors, and staff—became nuclei of resistance and generators of counter-discourses. Martinelli argues that these intellectual and pedagogical practices not only contested the legitimacy of the regimes but also helped articulate new visions of democracy, human rights, and political pluralism that would become central in the transitions to democracy. His analysis underscores the enduring role of higher education institutions as both victims and agents of political transformation in Latin America's authoritarian past.

In conclusion, *Violence and Politics in Contemporary Latin American History* provides a comprehensive examination of political violence in the region, exploring its historical roots, its ongoing impact on memory and political discourse, and its influence on contemporary political dynamics. The essays presented here offer critical insights into how political violence has been both a tool of State control and a focal point for resistance. By analysing the construction of enemies, the manipulation of historical narratives, and the persistence of militarized memory, this dossier sheds light on the ongoing challenges of achieving justice, truth, and reconciliation in Latin America—a region deeply marked by its violent past.

Francesco Davide Ragno

Holds a PhD in History and Society of the Contemporary Age at the Italian Institute of Human Sciences – SUM and is currently a Junior Assistant professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna, where he teaches *International Relations and Development in Latin America*. He is the author of *Liberale o Populista? Il radicalismo argentino (1930–1943)* (Il Mulino, 2017) and (con B. Calandra) *Argentina. Biografia di una Nazione* (Il Mulino, 2025).

Contact: francesco.ragno3@unibo.it

Fulvia Zega

Holding a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Roma Tre, Dr. Fulvia Zega is currently a researcher in the History and Institutions of the Americas at

the Department of Antiquities, Philosophy, and History at the University of Genoa. Her academic work focuses on the contemporary histories of Argentina and Brazil, with particular attention to their relations with Europe. Her research interests include Latin American authoritarianism, the Brazilian Estado Novo, Argentine nationalism, anti-Semitism, and political violence.

Contact: fulvia.zega@unige.it

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