

Behind the Melodrama

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR.

Try not to be put off by the melodramatic title of the recently published *Forgotten Continent*. Of course Latin America hasn't been forgotten (nor is it, actually, a continent). You want forgotten continents? Try Australia. Or Antarctica. The book's overwrought, clichéd subtitle (*The Battle for Latin America's Soul*) is unforgivable in its own way—the sort of thing dreamed up by desperate editors in search of an attention-grabbing phrase.

Fortunately, the mess of the title is no measure of the book itself. Michael Reid, a longtime Latin America correspondent for *The Economist*, provides an in-depth survey of Latin America that makes winning use of the author's years as a journalist and first-hand observer of the region, and also draws on the thinking of academics and specialists. Moreover, Reid is not afraid to provide his own assessments, to go beyond description, to tell us instead of just showing us.

Forgotten Continent indeed begins with the conceit that Latin America has been forgotten by the rest of the West and the developed world. But this is only a minor thread of Reid's argument, and it quickly gives way to a rich discussion that makes this book a first-rate introduction to Latin America in the twenty-first century.

Reid sees at work two competing forces that he believes will determine Latin America's near-term future: "populist autocracy, as personified by Hugo Chávez and others, and democratic reformism" of the sort found in Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. An optimist, Reid argues that the latter will win out because Latin Americans now understand that populism is but a path to the past, and a self-limiting one at that. Populism does not lead to the kind of long-term growth and development that can spring

Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul

by Michael Reid. Yale University Press, 2007.

Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia

by Winifred Tate. University of California Press, 2007.

from market capitalism guided by democratically elected governments. (Reid mentions resource-rich Australia, and how it entered the developed world, as a possible model for the region.)

The author is well aware of recent developments that might seem to undercut his optimism. He acknowledges the soft coups that have afflicted

parts of the region, along with the more widespread popular disaffection with "neoliberal" policies of the 1990s that were promoted by the United States through the Washington Con-

sensus. But he sees these as minor disruptions amid strong, broad trends toward liberal governance and liberal economic policy—trends flowing from the forces of globalization generally and from lessons that political leaders have learned from the past.

Is Reid blinded by his own ideological predispositions, unable to see a stronger undercurrent of indigenous populist revival flowing throughout the region? Does he underestimate the forces propelling Chávez, which include a popular desire to demolish ossified institutional structures dominated by a political class that enriches only itself? Perhaps. In the meantime, enjoy Reid's tour: He is an informed, intelligent, and sensible guide who may provide encouragement to even the most jaded pessimist.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN ACTION

Counting the Dead, Winifred Tate's new book about Colombia, is considerably less uplifting. Indeed, the numbers she presents to depict Colombia's security problems are numbing. The homicide rate in 2002 was 66 dead per 100,000 Colombians—down from 86 per 100,000 in the early 1990s, but still 11 times higher than the US rate. (This translates into more than 20,000 Colombian homicides—the term encompasses political killings—annually.) According to Human Rights Watch, more than 2 million people are

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internally displaced—a much larger figure, for example, than the number of those forced from their homes in Iraq. And Colombia's kidnapping rate—a reflection of efforts to fund an insurgency and paramilitaries—has set world records (recently surpassed by Venezuela).

The cause of this mayhem? A decades-long war between the Colombian military and leftist rebel guerrillas; plus, since the 1990s, the rise of the paramilitary forces, backed by drug traffickers and wealthy landowners, who have sown the Colombian countryside with dead and displaced.

This combination of problems has come to be known as “Colombianization”—a term that has also been used in reference to El Salvador and Brazil as they experience increases in narco-violence. Although security in Colombia itself has improved recently, and large numbers of the paramilitaries have demobilized, “Colombianization” remains an enormous problem in its country of origin and elsewhere in the region. Tate does not use the term in *Counting the Dead*, but as a human rights activist turned scholar, she is intimately interested in the phenomena that the term encompasses and how these phenomena are viewed, categorized, and explained through the prism of modern human rights.

Tate provides a fascinating meditation on how the idea of human rights “has been used by different and competing groups to mobilize political action” in Colombia. She draws on her experience as an activist in the country beginning in the late 1980s to explicate an understanding of this process, which forms the main focus of the book.

But an intriguing second narrative also takes shape, almost unintentionally, one that steps outside the activist's typical understanding of human rights and begins to question the very practice of human rights activism. Agitating on behalf of human rights is an area that has only recently begun to receive academic attention, and Tate

seems less interested in critically exploring the limits of activism than in simply observing the process, based on her background.

She finds that the professional human rights community, under the sway of what she calls the “imaginary” international laws and conventions governing human rights practices, is curiously distanced from the political concerns that drive indigenous human rights groups in Colombia. The human rights work of the international community is focused on documenting and illuminating abuse, not on transforming the political structures and institutions that allow human rights abuses to occur in the first place. The international community can bring attention to abuses committed by the state (and others) and treat human rights as ends in themselves—but real change requires political action.

This conundrum takes on a paradoxical significance when Tate discusses the Colombian institutions that have been created by human rights activism: “Proliferating state human rights agencies, through the creation of endless bureaucratic loops incapable of prompting significant political reforms, end up primarily engaged in the production of impunity. By siphoning off the human rights funding and resources offered by the foreign governments and international agencies, these state bureaucracies become another mechanism through which perpetrators of political violence evade public scrutiny and sanction.”

Tate's assessment is not made with the intention of damning the entire human rights project, but instead is meant to highlight an unintended, perverse consequence of it. Tate approaches this task with a mature and measured judgment. This trait is a hallmark of her book, which provides an important addition to our understanding of modern Colombia and the political violence it has suffered for decades. ■

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