

2010

## Steve C. Ropp on Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope. By Sonia Cardenas. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 256pp.

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### Recommended Citation

Ropp, Steve C. (2010) "Steve C. Ropp on Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope. By Sonia Cardenas. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 256pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol10/iss1/8>



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**Abstract**

A review of:

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**Keywords**

Human rights, Latin America, Human rights violations, Human rights reform

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**Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope. By Sonia Cardenas. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 256pp.**

*Human Rights in Latin America* is a textbook that is organized around three general topics and the puzzles that accompany them. First, how can one best account for the fact that state leaders in the region decide to violate the rights of their citizens in the first place? Second, why will these same state leaders sometimes begin to adopt reform measures (including signing on to international treaties, passing domestic legislation, and establishing new institutions) that better protect human rights? And finally, what accounts for the movement toward greater accountability for past human rights violations in Latin America? Why have many states invented new mechanisms and associated institutions such as truth commissions to hold perpetrators of these violations accountable for their past actions?

Cardenas begins with a brief historical overview, which describes the shifting geographical locus of major human rights violations in Latin America over the past four decades. During the 1970s, such violations were largely concentrated in the so-called Southern Cone countries of South America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay) and situated within the larger global context of the Cold War. In the 1980s, the global context remained the same but the locus of major violations shifted to Central American countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador that were caught up in bloody civil wars. With the end of the Cold War, human rights violations have become more geographically diffuse (e.g. Mexico, Colombia, and Peru) and associated with a much broader range of norms-violating agents such as drug cartels.

The core of this textbook consists of chapters that deal with possible explanations for violations and for subsequent state reforms. With regard to explaining violations, Cardenas reviews the major “common sense” theories that stress deep primordial group animosities, struggles between the forces of good and evil, and specific cultures (such as those existing in Latin America) that are seen as more prone to violence. Finding these explanations lacking in many respects, Cardenas then summarizes empirical evidence from the social sciences which suggests that actors who violate human rights norms may operate according to a rational calculus that leads them to violate these norms under specific conditions such as war. Furthermore, this rational calculus may be framed by exclusionary ideologies such as anti-communism that provide perpetrators with a larger framework and rationale for engaging in these abuses.

Cardenas’s overview of theories of human rights change stresses the work of scholars such as Kathryn Sikkink, who provides a dynamic and multi-phased representation of the way in which transnational advocacy networks (TANs) interact with local human rights groups in order to facilitate change “from above and below.” More specifically, she applies the “spiral model” of human rights change developed by Thomas Risse and Sikkink in *The Power of Human Rights* (1999) to examine change processes over the past four decades in the three Latin American regions mentioned above. Her general conclusion from this overview is that the most rapid and sustained human rights progress came in the Southern Cone countries, and that this progress is best explained by the very complex linkages that existed there between externally-generated human rights pressures and domestic processes of democratization.

Although Cardenas suggests that a great deal of progress has been made in Latin America with regard to protecting human rights, she also notes that there are some disturbing similarities between the Cold War years and the present epoch. What she calls new global “threat frameworks” (e.g. the War on Drugs and War on Terror) that can be used to justify continued violations have been constructed by state leaders in Latin America and elsewhere. The existence of these new frameworks, combined with endemic poverty and continued impunity for many norm-violating elites, leads her to be less than sanguine about the future of the region.

Cardenas’s first book on *Conflict and Compliance* (2007) presented to a largely academic audience with a highly theorized and empirically tested account of why states in the international system react either positively or negatively to external pressure for compliance with human rights norms. By contrast, this is a textbook specifically designed for college students and, as such, is accompanied by a host of useful teaching aids. Since it will probably be best used by upper-division undergraduates, it would be of most value to students when preceded by an introductory course in Latin American politics.

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