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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Liza Gross. *Handbook of Leftist Guerrilla Groups in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995. xix + 165 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-8494-8.

Reviewed by Teivo Teivainen (University of Helsinki)  
Published on H-LatAm (January, 1997)



## Handbook of a Violent Mind-Set?

With the recent reports on the appearance of various armed groups in Mexico and especially the astonishing media bomb exploded by the occupation of the Japanese ambassador's residence in Peru by the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru, Latin American left-wing guerillas have become a surprisingly hot topic. For anyone looking for a reliable and easy to use source on their variety since the late 1950s, Liza Gross's handbook is a reasonably good choice.

It provides concise alphabetically ordered chapters on leftist guerillas in nineteen Latin American and Caribbean countries, and its usefulness is most apparent in terms of describing the most relevant figures, dates, and actions of the various groups. The approach is relatively unreflective and nontheoretical, and, as the author states, its purpose is to gather and process existing information in one comprehensive source. Apart from some minor errors, such as the claim that "thousands" were injured in the car bomb detonated by Sendero Luminoso on Lima's Tarata street in July 1992, the factual information is, as far as I am able to judge, mostly correct.[1] The choice of countries and groups seems fairly adequate, though one can wonder why, for example, Puerto Rico, which has had various left-wing guerilla organizations, is left out.[2]

The author states that she does not aim at offering "analysis or interpretations of contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean" nor "spectacular revelations" (p. 3). Even if an approach claims to cling to pure facts, it is obviously embedded in an interpretative framework

and influenced by background assumptions, which can have various degrees of coherence. It can be considered somewhat inappropriate to evaluate Gross's book by the standards of scholarly work, if she claims to have "no analysis." There are, however, some elements in her conceptual choices and interpretations that are worth a few comments.

The general criteria Gross used for identifying leftist guerilla groups are four-fold. First, they are driven by a leftist ideology, "whether Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoist, Guevarist, or Castrists." As such, the listing of possible ideological standpoints seems rather narrow, but the inclusion, for example, of the Mexican Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), shows that the criterion has been used in a flexible way. Perhaps a conceptually more coherent alternative would have been defining the meaning of "left-wing" less rigidly. The second condition for inclusion is that the group seeks "the subversion of the established sociopolitical structure and its replacement by a Marxist or Marxism-inspired state." Also on this account, the EZLN's inclusion seems somewhat problematic. The author treats the EZLN basically as any old guerilla group, and states that it is "bucking a historical trend going in the exact opposite direction." Though the argument is not totally unjustified, the often stated differences of the EZLN with the "traditional" guerilla groups included in the book could have been at least mentioned.

The third basis is that the group is committed to armed struggle. One gets the impression that the au-

thor has a rather dichotomous conception of the differences between armed and non-armed left-wing groups. According to her, the former “cannot conceive of change without the notion of armed struggle,” whereas the latter have not even “contemplated” this possibility. My interviews with Latin American left-wing leaders and activists have convinced me that the latter part of the dichotomy is simply wrong. There have been various left-wing political actors willing to consider armed struggle as a possibility, at least “under different conditions,” though in recent years their number has probably been greatly diminished. It also seems a simplification to define the guerillas as unable to conceive of change without arms, considering that there have been various individuals and groups that have transformed themselves from armed to non-armed struggle, and vice versa. The fourth, and perhaps least controversial, criterion is that the groups are at least partly clandestine, and unable to survive as open organizations.

In many Latin American countries, the governments have often accused the foreign press and scholars of using the term “guerilla” to describe what they regard as “terrorists.” The author’s terminological choices on the guerilla-terrorist continuum are relatively coherent, though it is slightly surprising that the terms “terrorist” and “terrorism” appear so often when describing the Salvadorean groups, while in some other cases, like Sendero Luminoso, where these terms might be more appropriate, the choice is rather unambiguously “guerilla.” Another conceptual choice is the use of the term “Communist.” In the individual chapters the ideological backgrounds of the groups are generally analyzed more carefully, but in the introduction the Sandinistas, for example, are classified as having established an order “along Communist lines.”

Even if the author regards her work as an organization of previously existing data, there is a part where she offers some more general “reflections on violence and its role in the region.” She claims that “one of the keys to understanding the Latin American mind-set” is that “there exists a strong tradition of resorting to violent means.” She traces the origins of this mind-set to the pre-Columbian civilizations, “perpetually engaged in wars and fights,” and mentions the “bloody trail” of the independence fighters as well as some more recent events

as “chilling examples of the levels of ferocity that can be reached in Latin America.”

On the basis of these events, she claims that violence is “the norm” in Latin America. The guerilla groups are not deviants from this norm, but examples of the violent mind-set. Even though it is useful and correct to situate the Latin American guerilla groups in the context of the often violent traditions of the continent, to claim that the Latin American mind-set is somehow intrinsically violent is, at least in my opinion, a rather dubious assumption. Without speculating on the theoretical and ideological reasons for this part of the author’s reflections, her statements can be considered as (re)producing a discourse in which the Latin Americans are defined as violent “others.” To the extent the “other” is defined as inherently violent, it becomes easier, in times of conflict, to justify tough measures against him/her. The violent mind-set argument is reinforced by the only quote the author uses in this part of her book, in which an Argentine guerilla says: “There is no action here and I cannot live without blood.”

#### Notes

[1]. According to the Peruvian human rights organization Asociacion Pro-Derechos Humanos (APRODEH), twenty were killed and somewhat over one hundred injured in the Tarata bombing.

[2]. Among the Puerto Rican left-wing guerilla groups, *Latin American Political Movements*, ed. Ciaran o Maolain (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1985), lists Comandos Armados de Liberacion, Ejercito Popular Boricua, Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional, Movimiento Independentista Armado, and Movimiento de Liberacion. Gross mentions Puerto Rican Macheteros as an example of a “mainly” national movement engaged in the overthrow of a colonial power, even though their ideology presents definite leftist overtones. Even if I cannot claim to have any expertise on the Puerto Rican situation, using this argument to exclude all the Puerto Rican groups from the classification seems hardly justified.

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**Citation:** Teivo Teivainen. Review of Gross, Liza, *Handbook of Leftist Guerilla Groups in Latin America and the Caribbean*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. January, 1997.

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