



Book Review

Lucía Dammert (2025). *Anatomía del poder ilegal. Violencia, crimen organizado y corrupción en América Latina*. Bogotá: Ariel – Editorial Planeta

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Traditionally, when we aim to understand the scale of organized crime, we study phenomena such as drug trafficking, illegal mining, or money laundering, relying on macro-level data—though often with significant limitations. Despite organized crime being a regional and transnational issue, obtaining accurate data remains a major hurdle. This lack of precision makes it difficult to fully grasp the regional landscape or to develop public policy responses to challenges that are becoming increasingly urgent. Other ethnographic or journalistic approaches have sought a deeper understanding of how specific dynamics or locations experience the impact of illegal economies and markets. Lucía Dammert’s *Anatomía del poder ilegal: violencia, crimen organizado y corrupción en América Latina* [Anatomy of Illegal Power: Violence, Organized Crime, and Corruption in Latin America] bridges these two ambitions.

The book demonstrates that illegal power in Latin America is not only a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in various institutional layers since its very inception, but one that has also shown the capacity (and, I would add, the resilience and flexibility) to adapt to shifting political and economic contexts. From Dammert’s perspective, the trajectory of these criminal powers, networks, markets, and actors can be understood as both a consequence of and a response to endemic inequality and exclusion. It is a byproduct of a lack of opportunity and a series of political, economic, social, and institutional factors that create the “conditions of possibility” for a critical security situation to take hold. Among these factors, the author identifies a deep-seated political crisis regarding the meaning of the nation-state and political representation; the clear rise of corruption and its entrenchment within state structures; the establishment of parallel economies that are highly dynamic and adaptable to state controls; the use of violence as a conflict-resolution tool and a defining feature of public interaction; and, finally, significant structural weaknesses in the state’s ability to combat these phenomena or invest in public health.

To present this “atlas of illegal power” of the region, the book explores the various expressions of organized crime. It begins with the most structural elements—such as homicide rates and the dynamics of illegal markets—before moving through a series of specific phenomena: first, drug trafficking; then, human trafficking and migrant smuggling; followed by illegal mining and environmental crimes (primarily logging, fishing, and the illegal wildlife trade). The author then addresses extortion and its various forms, which serve to consolidate illegal power, followed by an overview of the arms trade, concluding with the laundering of illicit proceeds.



In this way, the book does more than just detail the most visible behaviors of organized crime; it successfully interweaves these phenomena, showing how their respective value chains intersect at different stages. By recognizing that contemporary criminal markets are diverse and ever-changing, this approach provides an understanding not only of “criminal portfolios” but also of how these shifts occur. Consequently, the book moves beyond a narrow view of organized crime as being solely tied to drug trafficking, instead focusing on complex, resilient organizations that manage multiple illicit activities and adapt fluidly to market conditions when the drug market is not a sustainable business.

Through the stories of inhabitants from various corners of the continent, the book illustrates the impact of organized crime on the everyday lives of those in Latin America who must coexist with violence and corruption. Dammert begins the narrative of violence and illegality with the story of Sara, who lives with her 12 and 8-year-old children in an informal settlement in Lima, where gangs have seized control and are fighting for territory. She lives with constant anxiety over her children's future, caught between a lack of opportunity and the risk of their recruitment and exploitation by these groups. Julia, meanwhile, became entangled in the cocaine trade due to consumption and was eventually imprisoned for acting as a drug mule, an event that upended her social networks and her life's trajectory. Carla was deceived by Javier, who, under the guise of a romantic relationship, convinced her to travel to Cancun; there, she was sexually exploited and threatened for 27 months until she fell ill and was discarded. Gabriel had to resort to a loan from these criminal groups, paying usurious rates—more than double the principal in four months—just to cover his family's expenses. Rodrigo, Manuel, and Luis were forced to pay various “taxes” and extortion fees to carry out their construction work in Lima. The book also recounts the stories of rivers, fish, mountains, and seas contaminated by environmental crimes. In these stories, the reality of organized crime in the region is humanized. In Dammert's words, her work seeks to bring “seriousness and humanity” to the understanding of “one of the fundamental issues facing Latin American democracies and citizens today: the growth of illegal markets” (p. 12).

This effort to reconstruct an atlas of organized crime—examining how these phenomena relate to one another and the various ways organized crime and its constituent groups express themselves—makes this an essential reference for establishing a common understanding of current events. There are at least three reasons why this book represents a significant contribution to criminological literature, Latin American regional studies, and the field of security, violence, and organized crime studies: one methodological, one related to scale, and finally, as previously noted, one concerning the framing and appreciation of these phenomena.

Dammert's work joins recent efforts to center the voices of victims within our shared knowledge and narratives. It integrates accounts of current events and available data with a micro-level approach, allowing us to understand the consequences of these phenomena through concrete stories and examples from those who endure the daily violence of armed groups and the dynamics of organized crime. This is made possible, as noted at the beginning of the book, by exhaustive empirical work spanning over a decade of meetings and interviews across more than 20 cities in at least 12 countries. This fieldwork is seamlessly connected with an extensive literature and documentary review, serving as a roadmap for diagnosing the violence of illegal power in the region.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that violence and the role of illegal power are presented as endemic to the region's social, political, and economic dynamics, Dammert makes it clear that organized crime is not an exclusively Latin American phenomenon. On the contrary, by reconstructing the entire value chain of activities like drug trafficking, illegal fishing, or money laundering, the book illustrates the well-known role played by actors in the United States, China, and Europe—whether in demanding the products of these illegal economies or performing a specific function within their value chains. Utilizing these local narratives, describing these phenomena comparatively across countries, and illustrating the transnational nature of organized crime as a global rather than purely regional issue represents a multi-scale and multi-method approach. This constitutes a significant contribution to criminological literature and provides a vital framework for addressing these issues within the public policy sphere.

This approach should be further deepened and strengthened through ethnographic, interdisciplinary, and collaborative research to address one of the challenges once posed by Left Realism: giving a central place to the study of crime as an element that affects the most disadvantaged social groups (and, for that matter, non-human species and entities). From this perspective, organized crime is not only a threat to the rule of law and institutional stability; it is, primarily, a force that daily impacts communities, ecosystems, and vulnerable groups for whom these illegal powers dictate their ways of life and living conditions.

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