

Democracy in Danger

S2 E12 Nuestra America

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Roberto Armengol [00:00:05] And I'm Robert Armengol, sitting in this week for Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:08] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Roberto Armengol [00:00:14] Well Will, thanks for having me on today. It's a real delight to be with you today as the co-host. Usually I'm in the producer's chair just nagging you and Siva.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:24] Hey, Robert, it's great to have you on, especially given today's topic, which I know is close to your own interests.

Roberto Armengol [00:00:30] That's right. You know, we're turning to Latin America this time and we're going to try to make sense of all the turmoil that the region has long faced. We'll be talking about problems that drive so many, like my own family, to immigrate to the United States. So this year already we've seen a huge surge in minors desperately crossing the southern border all by themselves. It's a real headache for President Biden. Detention centers are filling up and he's trying at the same time to make good on this pledge, you know, to take a more humane approach to immigration than his predecessor.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:02] So the president's immigration plan calls for four billion dollars to address the underlying reasons that people migrate north to the United States in the first place. And now there's this perception, perhaps, that Biden is going to be more lenient on unauthorized immigration. And that actually led his team to announce last month that the border is not open.

Roberto Armengol [00:01:25] And aside from those socioeconomic factors, we just can't discount the reality that in Central and South America, in many parts of Mexico, people are scared and vulnerable. There's a lot of violence, whether it's political violence at the hands of oppressive states or extrajudicial violence in areas where state institutions seem to have broken down. The murder rate in Mexico alone, Will, has nearly tripled over the last 15 years.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:50] It's amazing. Well, to help us unravel some of these complex issues, we've invited a historian and sociologist of Latin America and Mexico in particular onto the show today. Gema Kloppe-Santamaría is with us from Loyola University in Chicago. She's the author of the recent book *In The Vortex of Violence, Lynching, Extralegal Justice and the State in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. Gema, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:02:16] Thank you, Will. And thank you, Robert. Thank you for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:20] So in your research and writing, let me just kind of set out a big question. You know, you remind us that Mexico is a thriving player in many respects in the global economy, and it's a fully functioning electoral democracy. At least since the late 80s,

there's been genuine multiparty governance. But at the same time, you're a scholar of vigilante justice and mob violence, which has a long history. And there is still a great deal of it in Mexico today. So how can we square this regrettable persistence of violence - you know, the power of drug cartels and so on - with this more positive story that Mexico has to tell of a democracy moving forward?

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:03:01] And this is a very important question and one that I believe really pushes us to think about the quality of democracy in Mexico and Latin America at large. I mean, like you said, like in many regards, Mexico is doing very well. I mean, economically speaking, it has been doing well since at least the 1980s and 1990s. It has an alternation of power, elections have functioned very well, like electoral democracy works well in Mexico. And I would say in macro economic terms, the country is doing well, too. And also, let me just add another dimension of democracy that I think is important. Mexico has a very vibrant civil society and we see that in the feminist movement now, that has made it to the headlines recently, that is really holding accountable politicians and public officials and asking for more transparency. On the other hand, there is this other darker side of contemporary Mexico, which has to do with rampant levels of drug related violence. But not only. There are also kidnappings, extortions like these other more like disorganized forms of violence that affect people as citizens in their everyday lives. And there is also vigilante justice that includes lynching, mob violence, the history that I have studied, and I think to make sense of this we need to understand the contradictions of democracy in Mexico that are not exclusive to Mexico, but also that are characterized in Latin America at large. And these have to do with inequality, economic inequality. So economic development, that looks good at the macro level, but that it hasn't translated into better economic distribution and that has pushed people to participate in the informal economy and in illicit markets. This is not new. I mean, this has been happening for quite a while now. On the other hand, there's also the question of the lack of reforms that were and continue to be much needed in terms of the justice and security apparatus in Mexico. 93 percent of crimes go unpunished in Mexico today, so impunity runs high, and that speaks to the fact that several administrations from the left, from the right, from the center, they have postponed much needed reforms to the justice and security apparatus. So the police needs to be reformed, needs to be professionalized, modernized so that people can trust them more. This hasn't happened and this hasn't happened in great part because the war on drugs has prioritized the security approaches that are militarized, that are focused on short term policies. People do not trust authorities. The police is not perceived as a legitimate actor by citizens, and crime has increased over the last decades. So here's the story of Mexico and I believe is a story common to other Latin American democracies. These very deep contradictions.

Roberto Armengol [00:05:58] Gema, I wonder if you could help us understand the role of the police in facilitating or enabling in some way this disorganized violence you're talking about. You open your book with a story of two brothers who were lynched in a town in the state of Puebla about five years ago. And it's a really chilling account of mob violence. It made international headlines and it looked by all accounts, that the police basically stepped aside and allowed this sort of vigilante justice to take place. I'm wondering if you could narrate that for us. And, you know, is this sort of thing common? It sounds like it is. What does it say about the state of public institutions in Mexico?

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:06:41] So, yeah, I decided to open the book with this story in addition to its visibility and the news coverage that it received, the lynching of these two brothers, Jose Abraham and Rey David Copado Molina, in Aljapan, Puebla, in the year 2015, really showed some of the main elements that I wanted to underline. Namely that

contrary to what some social scientists have claimed in regards to this phenomenon, lynching is not really an expression of a state absence, or at least that doesn't tell the whole story. And it's not either an expression of a state failure necessarily. Rather, what we see, as in the case of the lynching of these two brothers, is that many times the police is present. However, people do not trust the capacity of the police to deliver the type of justice that they deem necessary to punish criminal conduct. So in this case, for instance, the brothers had been accused of attempting to kidnap a little girl. The police had detained the two brothers. They were being interrogated in the municipal offices. The brothers have denied the crime. They said that they were rather posters, that they were doing a survey on tortilla consumption in this town. The police was able to communicate with their boss and to confirm the identity of these two brothers. The little girl that was supposed to be the victim of this attempt of kidnaping actually declare that she had never seen the brothers. And despite of this, the rumor had already taken over the situation and people were distrustful of the version of reality that the police were saying. So these two brothers were from out of town. They were young. I mean, they look strange. And so that ignited people's anger. Now, like you mentioned, the police reaction to this, another lynching is ambivalent. So indeed, in many cases, the police is simply outnumbered by the mob. But in many other cases, police officers simply decide not to intervene and believing that the so-called criminals deserve this punishment or are even more actively complicit in the organization of these extrajudicial killings. Now, these will come as no surprise to those that are familiar with the history of lynching in the United States. But for people that work on lynchings in contemporary Latin America, this comes as a surprise. One last thing I would say about this case is it allowed me also to point out the fact that, you know people is not just trying to correct the state's incapacity to provide justice, but they also want to deliver a particularly cruel, corporeal, collective form of justice. So in the case of these two brothers, they were attacked with knives. They were injured very badly. They were beaten to death and they were burned alive. So I think this excess of violence tells you that these are highly communicative acts. And that is not only about correcting the impunity that exists, although that is central to this story, but it's also about inflicting harm to these victims in order to send a message that this conduct won't be tolerated.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:59] Well, let me see if I can shift this from the ground to the sort of executive level. And I want to ask you a question about the current political environment in Mexico. We've talked a lot about right wing populists and nativists on this show, people who use racial grievances, and they developed this intense loyalty of their voters. But in Mexico, there is a populist president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, but his roots are on the left and he's got significant support. He's been channeling funds to the poor, to dealing with various social crises of one kind or another. But critics are saying that Lopez Obrador is weakening institutions that, you know, have safeguarded rights, human rights, clean elections, transparency. Maybe he's using funds to build up a loyal party base. What's your take? It has this Mexican populist been good for democracy?

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:10:52] That's a very good question. People have great expectations about Lopez Obrador or Amlo as he is known popularly in Mexico. People have great expectations about what Amlo could bring about in terms of security, for instance, that are the issues that I follow more closely. He has pledged to leave behind the militarization of the country, the war on drugs. He had promised that he would abandon these repressive short term measures, the worst drug trafficking and other crimes. He promised to deliver a more integral approach. That was going to tackled the institutional social roots of violence. We haven't seen any of that or really any of that. What we have seen is a continuation of the government utilizing the military in public security functions. The recent release of a Salvador Cienfuegos, the former defense minister, and the lack of

any investigation despite the fact that he was being investigated in the United States, that has really left a feeling of concern among many people in Mexico.

Roberto Armengol [00:12:01] I'm wondering if we could zoom out from Mexico a little bit and talk about Latin America at large. You know, I'm an anthropologist. My own research focuses on Cuba. And Cuba is not known for its democratic institutions by any stretch. On the other hand, it's also not known for extralegal violence or crime in general. It's a pretty safe place. And that's confounding to a lot of people. And I certainly don't want to oversimplify this and suggest that somehow authoritarian regimes are better at managing social chaos, social violence. The police certainly have a history of oppression in Cuba. But, you know, what are the parallels we should be looking to in the rest of Latin America? And how can we have it all? I mean, how can we have a vibrant democracy and safer, more secure societies that provide well-being for their citizens? What's the outlook for this region?

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:12:58] Yeah, I think as I was saying, like some of the characteristics that I describe for Mexico are also applicable to Latin America. I mean, these countries, the region in general, this transition to democracy happen in parallel to the more active participation of this country in the globalized, market oriented economy. And that brought about economic tensions, economic contradictions within these countries that also generate the increasing levels of crime. I mean, we know for a fact that robberies have been on the rise since the 1990s, which coincides with the decades in which this country's transition to democracy. There's also the need to push for institutional reforms that didn't happen. I mean, this is particularly true for Central America, Mexico. But you also see this in countries like Brazil where the same police that was operated under undemocratic conditions has continued to operate now under the umbrella of democracy. So we transition from this kind of like rhetoric's of anti communism and the need to fight these internal enemies. Now, the rhetoric about the enemies, the criminal is a drug trafficker, is a gang member in the Northern Triangle of Central America. And these police, they do not act with accountability, with transparency. They abuse their force. They participate in extrajudicial killings. So, again, these are the legacies of the past that the transition to democracy did not solve. Now, how do we alleviate this? A couple things that I can mention, and this comes also from my experience having worked with the U.N.D.P. The nations development program. The experiences that work at the local level are those where citizens are more able to trust police. And these work with community forms of policing. With the police that is perceived as being closer to citizens with models of citizen security that are really centered on human security, that are integral. That are providing a more wholesome understanding of what is driving crime and violence, meaning that they tackle the institutional roots, the social roots, so change is possible. The problem is that it happens slowly. And in democracies with these electoral cycles people want to see change happen quickly. And that's the challenge of democracies in Latin America and elsewhere.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:28] Gema, let me bring the United States into this conversation a little bit. It's kind of sort of bitterly ironic situation and that the United States should not really be telling any other country how to reform its police, since we were in the midst, of course, of a very difficult national conversation about police brutality, racial violence and a national protest movement. The horrors of the era of lynching have come back to haunt us in the 21st century. But nonetheless, a lot of our listeners are located in the United States and they may well be wondering, you know, what should the United States be doing about some of these problems in its southern neighbor? Should are there ways in which the United States can contribute to the kind of reforms you're talking about, whether it's in

policing or in development or in inequality? Or is the United States really part of the problem? Has it tended to exacerbate many of these sort of structural social economic crises that continue to dog Mexico and to exact such a high price? Ideally, what would you like to tell the Biden administration to be thinking about as they try to assist and play a positive role in improving human security in Mexico?

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:16:41] I think the United States has undoubtedly been part of the problem, but because of that it can also be part of the solution. So let me begin by saying that these countries I mean, the history of these countries in terms of how they react to security threats is intimately linked to the United States. So we have a during the long Cold War in Latin America, the impetus to police and criminalize political dissent, particularly from the left and the so-called threat of communism. That impetus really follow also from the United States, asking the governments in these countries to police and to criminalize these groups. Now, in contemporary Latin America, the US has also been central in terms of the approach that Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, the Central American countries and others have had towards the drug problem. On the one hand, again, promoting this idea that drugs must be criminalized. That the best way to tackle this problem is to eradicate cultivation, production, trafficking and consumption. I mean, declaring an all out war against drugs and on the other, through U.S. assistance. I mean, so the United States I mean, since Plan Colombia and later on with Mexico, the Merida Initiative, it has supported these kind of short short-term militarized approaches to deal with security threats. Now, these countries, of course, have also agency in this story. And I think it's important to acknowledge that, for instance, in the case of the Merida Initiative, the Merida Initiative was promoted initially by the Mexican president, Felipe Calderon. He was the one that approached the United States and said we want resources to fight drug trafficking organizations. And he was the one also that decided that this should be done through a militarized repressive approach. So these countries have agency. I mean, and there is a fascinating new historiography that has demonstrated how the war on drugs intersected with the dirty wars in many of these countries. So this is not a top down story where the US says this has to be done and Latin America, just follows. No. I mean, these governments have their own agency and their own responsibility in the making of these crises.

Roberto Armengol [00:19:05] Gema, you do such a good job of reminding us of the really sordid history of American intervention in Latin America going back really two centuries. I think, of the CIA intervention in Chile and the rise of Pinochet and in Colombia with the war on drugs, as you mentioned, and so on. I mean, the list is really endless and yet ordinary Americans aren't particularly familiar with that history. We don't think about it a lot. Mostly we think about Latin America through the lens of immigration. And I want to come back to that for a second, because I've always been frustrated by the conversation on immigration in this country. It seems to always come back to the question of should we allow more people, should we welcome more people or should we keep immigration down? And what you're telling us suggests that maybe we're asking the wrong question. We mentioned the four billion dollars that Biden is proposing we put toward the root causes of immigration. Is that enough? I mean, it sounds to me like what you're saying is we need more of that kind of thinking. And if so, is the administration undershooting what really needs to be done?

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:20:13] Yeah, I mean, this is an area where I really believe there is very strong chances of collaboration and aligning the interests between Mexico and the United States and Central America. Working towards a more integral understanding of what is driving migration. I mean, we know that people are abandoning their homes after making very difficult choices. These are not things that people do lightly,

abandoning their homes, abandoning their families. And I think it's important to remind ourselves of that. And it has to do with the economic conditions that they face. I mean, the lack of economic opportunities and the deep problems of poverty and inequality the Central American countries face. It has also to do with security. Of course, I mean, the very real fear of being recruited by gang members or young women like being also recruited or exploited sexually by these gangs and also environmental factors like environmental disasters that affect these countries. So there are several reasons why people are abandoning their homes. And, yes, I believe that the Biden administration, like by promising these resources, is moving in the right direction. Now, will it be enough? The question is how sustainable, how much political capital will be invested in this? I mean, there have been very good things done through CAHSEE, which was this assistance program also promoted by the United States. The United States is also promoting some prevention programs in the Northern Triangle that have actually yielded very positive results. So in contrast to the zero tolerance measures against gang members, which have only led to raising incarceration rates, more violence, a gang member is becoming more and more vicious. These preventive approaches have actually worked in Central America. I mean, there are several studies that show that. So I think it's less perhaps about the amount of money per say and more about how with how much political will with these efforts be promoted. The governments of Honduras, El Salvador and Honduras have repeatedly failed to really understand that zero tolerance measures simply have not worked. I mean, that manda dura policies are a failure. I mean that they have only increased violence. They have only increased impunity. So this is a good chance. I mean, take Biden's approach that seems to be more willing to work together towards a more citizen based, citizen focused security agenda.

Will Hitchcock [00:22:49] Well, Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Gema Kloppe-Santamaria [00:22:55] Thank you, Will. And thank you, Robert. This has been such a pleasure to talk to you.

Roberto Armengol [00:23:07] That was Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, a sociologist and assistant professor of Latin American history at Loyola University Chicago. She's the author of *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice and the State in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. And she's an editor of the recent volume *Violence and Crime in Latin America*.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:27] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

Jane Frankel [00:23:43] Hi, I'm Jane Frankel, an intern on Democracy in Danger. This week, we want to let you know about one of our most important partners this year, the podcast Democracy Works from Penn State. Since 2018, Democracy Works has been shining a light on self-government with powerful conversations on big picture topics like neoliberalism, gerrymandering and ranked choice voting. Past guests on the show include Atlantic staff writer Anne Applebaum, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and jazz great Wynton Marsalis. Give Democracy Works a listen and help support our network. Search Democracy Works in your podcast player and catch up on more than 150 episodes. New shows drop every Monday.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:27] Robert, that was a moving conversation, powerful. Gema reminds us that when it comes to the US Mexico border, we're all involved. What is happening there? What has been happening there for decades, for generations, in some way is an indictment of the authorities on both sides of the border. But it's also a reminder of the human costs of suffering, the agony that unfolds there day after day after day. And I feel that I personally and I think many Americans think of the problem of the border as a policy issue, one that can be resolved by tweaking our immigration policy or maybe having a more humane border patrol. No doubt those things are necessary. But I think there's kind of a conceptual issue here. We need to remember that there is an issue of profound human suffering that is often involved, and it may be fear and violence and vigilante violence of the kind that Gema spoke about today that's pushing people to take these risks and to set out on the road for an uncertain future. But, Robert, I'm reminded that your family, too, faced such difficult decisions in the late 50s and early 60s as the Cuban revolution occurred and then was for a time very violent, both before and after. Is the migration story in your family very much in the forefront of the sort of, you know, folk knowledge in your household? Is this something you all talked about? How did it shape the way your family talked about its own history?

Roberto Armengol [00:25:54] Right. Yeah, you know, so Cubans in my grandparents and parents generation regarded themselves in many still regard themselves as exiles, you know, which is a politically loaded term because they imagined their immigration story to have been one of escaping communism, which fits very well into the sort of American ideology of helping certain people and not others. Cuba was a very violent place. There was a lot of fear after what had been a very popular revolution came to power, because all of a sudden, you know, there were summary executions and a lot of score settling that seemed to depart from the stated goals of the Revolutionary Project for a lot of middle class Cubans and professionals. And, you know, my grandparents made a tough decision. My grandmother had an amazing story about waiting in a giant line and kind of working her way into the US embassy to get visas for herself, her husband, her own parents and her children. And, you know, Cubans received and still receive very favorable treatment in terms of their immigration status, which only in my adult life have I come to see as deeply problematic. And in comparison to other people from Latin America, that treatment has been demonstrably privileged. I mean, migration from Cuba today looks a lot more like it does from the rest of Latin America. As far as the reasons for it go, it generally has to do with economic deprivation and the hope of making a better life, not so much about escaping an oppressive regime. And as I mentioned earlier, Cuba is not by any stretch as violent as other places in the region.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:42] You know, one of the things that Gema really was able to illuminate for us is that sometimes violence in the streets, an ugly, brutal gang murder, a killing, the kind of thing that can really unsettle a community does in fact, have the collusion, whether active or passive, of the authorities themselves. And that's a very disturbing notion for those who are interested in functioning democracies. I mean, you're not supposed to have random killings by self-appointed vigilantes in the streets of your towns and your villages. At the same time, this is not unheard of in the United States. And it's one of those moments where we can learn something by looking at ourselves through the lens of other countries and other cultures. There's a long history of officials in the United States actively or passively participating in vigilante violence. The entire history of lynching is all about the way in which officials looked the other way or in some cases aided and abetted vigilante violence all across the south in the late 19th century, right up through the middle of the 20th century. So although the story that Gema tells is distinct to Mexico and to Latin America and its evolution, there's a lot we can learn about the problems that

American democracy has faced in dealing with and in confronting and in fact, inflicting violence itself.

Roberto Armengol [00:29:02] Right. And as we've talked about on the show, so much that history carries right through to the present and the summary execution of so many black men and women by law enforcement officers. Plus, let's not forget, the problems faced in Latin America are also problems of American democracy and US foreign policy going back two centuries. I was reminded in her commentary on that issue of one of my own heroes, the Cuban poet, an independence fighter, Jose Marti, in the late 19th century, who wrote a famous essay, Our America, Nuestra America, in which he made precisely this argument. It's been in the ether for a long time. He was not anti-American. He lived in the U.S. while helping support the independence movement in Cuba. The essay was published for the first time in New York City in 1891. He had strong ties to this country, but was well aware of the damage that had already been done and could possibly continue to take place if Americans did not recognize their equal partnership with these new Democratic neighbors to the south. And sadly, he was precient. The United States was not a good neighbor to Cuba or anywhere else in Latin America, for the most part, for the whole 20th century to come.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:30] Yeah, I mean, one thinks of the way in which the damage the United States did during the Cold War in Latin America is well known and is epic. But it remains shocking, especially to students coming to it, maybe for the first time in a college class on the Cold War in Latin America, the United States was extraordinarily aggressive, bellicose. It sided with military dictatorships, overthrew governments, willingly stood aside as U.S. armed militias and armies overthrew democratically elected regimes. And the consequence in many places was endemic civil war and indeed emigration. So, so much of the legacy of America's policy in the Cold War and in the war on drugs and other big policy initiatives has been to create instability in Central America. So we are all authors of the crisis at the southern border.

Roberto Armengol [00:31:21] Yeah, it's sad to think after a century and change that José Martí's worst predictions about the hemisphere have come to pass. He never saw Cuba free. He never got to participate in the building of that new nation or in confronting imperialism. He died famously on the battlefield with his face to the sun. And it's, I think, left to us to pick up the pieces of that and revisit that argument and think very carefully about it.

Will Hitchcock [00:32:00] Well, that's all for this week's show. Next time, we're going to replay an important episode we did last season, it's an interview with Yale scholar Elizabeth Hinton, an expert on mass incarceration and the history of policing.

Elizabeth Hinton [00:32:13] Policymakers spend more money on locking up young people than they do on educating young people. And so one wonders, what does that say about the health of American democracy?

Roberto Armengol [00:32:24] We'd love to hear from you in the meantime. Have you lived in a Latin American country? Let us know your experience and what you learned from it. You can tag us on Twitter @DinDpodcast. That's D-I-N-D podcast, or visit our Web site, DinDanger.org, to find notes on all our episodes. And you can leave a comment on any of our show pages.

Will Hitchcock [00:32:44] We've hit fifty thousand listens with your support. Thank you. Help keep the love coming. Leave us a review on Apple podcasts or wherever you stream the show.

Roberto Armengol [00:32:54] Democracy in Danger is produced by me Robert Armongol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell and Jane Frankel.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:03] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, the podcast Network of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock

Roberto Armengol [00:33:20] And don't worry everyone. Siva Vaidhyanathan will be back in the host seat next week. Stay tuned.