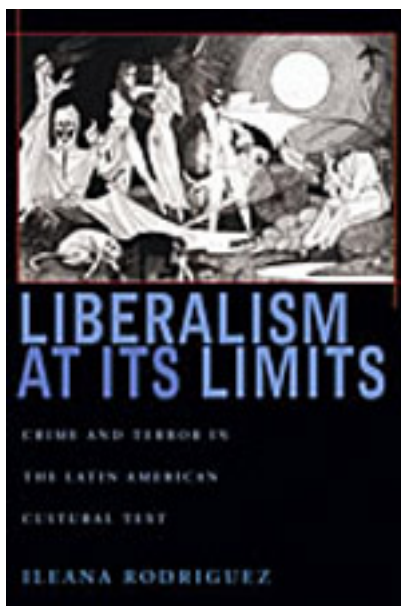


Ileana Rodríguez's *Liberalism at Its Limits*

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Rodríguez, Ileana. *Liberalism at Its Limits. Crime and Terror in the Latin American Cultural Text*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.



Ileana Rodríguez's *Liberalism at Its Limits* is a significant, impassioned critique of neoliberalism's impact on postcolonial "Creole societies" in the Americas in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Focusing on legacies of violence in Guatemala, Colombia, and Mexico, Rodríguez examines fantasies of liberalism played out by and for the elite against ethnically marginalized sectors of their populations to deliver a false sense of the democratic ideal. Her polemical, rigorous voice describes with empathy and rage the crises in governance and the breakdown of civil society that have led to pervasive criminality in Latin American states.

The book, which is divided into seven chapters, begins with a dense section delineating neoliberalism's polarizing effects on societies in the Americas. Distinguishing between type A societies (Europe) and type B societies (Creole), Rodríguez walks readers through the

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incongruous abstractions of liberal philosophy, which she reads through a wide range of critics, among them Nancy Fraser, Enrique Dussel, Jacques Rancière, Norma Alarcón, and Wahneema Lubiano. It is to Rodríguez's credit that this introductory section never becomes a mere screed but rather situates her thesis within a far-reaching critical context.

Not unlike Marguerite Feitlowitz's seminal book *A Lexicon of Terror*, which charted in detail the legacy of the "dirty war" in Argentina, Rodríguez's *Liberalism at Its Limits* is grounded not only in an invigorating spirit of academic enquiry and research, but also in a passionate political stance and a socially, morally conscious worldview.

Rodríguez speaks throughout the book with palpable sadness and outrage over the legacies of corruption and violence that have, on a historical and psychological level, damaged the metaphorical psyche of several Latin American countries. Rodríguez walks the reader through Guatemala with Rigoberta Menchú and *Rigoberta: la nieta de los Mayas*; through Colombia with Alfredo Molano's *Los años del tropel* and Alonso Salazar's *Born to Die in Medellín* and *La parábola de Pablo*; and through Mexico with two chapters on the unsolved murders of young women that regularly take place in Ciudad Juárez.

Rodríguez focuses on Rigoberta Menchú's role as an indigenous intellectual while de-emphasizing her global and local activism. This makes the chapter on Guatemala seem more sanguine than perhaps it should, especially given the intense descriptions of violence, atrocity, and reckless human carnage in the subsequent chapters on Colombia and Mexico. This is not to suggest that Menchú's work as a writer and intellectual claiming civil rights through acts of re-remembrance and the reconstitution of historically politicized subjectivities need be read through the same lens as the texts by Molano and Salazar or the news accounts and photographs from Ciudad Juárez; it is only to remark that there is a slight imbalance in the overall narrative of this bracing book.

In her chapters on Colombia and Mexico, Rodríguez is on strong ground. With a great degree of alacrity, skill, and alarum, she argues that Colombia is a "failed state" whose history of violence runs counter to the principles of liberalism, using testimonials compiled by Alfredo Molano in his book *Los años del tropel* to advance her argument. Analyzing the civil war and related events following Eliécer Gaitán's assassination, Rodríguez describes how language and speech failed to resolve conflicts between Liberals and Conservatives, resulting in territorial violence that pitted subsistence farmers against elites, and ultimately, the transformation of the farmer's struggle into a guerrilla movement. Her chronicle of pain and its testimonies leads her to turn to the narco-culture described in Alonso Salazar's *Born to Die in Medellín* and *La parábola de Pablo*. Rodríguez views Escobar and his men as cyborg bodies raiding the landscape with motorcycles and Uzis and claims that somehow, through this new virtual, globalized self, something manages to transcend the horrors of the past and achieve an exultant state. Of course, Rodríguez understands full well that Escobar is a criminal in the eyes of global culture, but she also stresses that for many in Colombia he is a kind of populist hero, and she presents

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a complex portrait of the link between the legacy of the civil war, Escobar's drug capital, and the de-sensitized urban class of *sicarios*, who are undefined, rootless, and caught in a steady stream of violence.

Rodríguez devotes the final chapters of her book to the femicide in Ciudad Juárez. These unsolved crimes have already generated a rather extensive literature, including Bolaño's *2066*, Lourdes Portillo's documentary "Señorita Extraviada," many distinguished essays, feminist criticism, independent and mainstream Hollywood feature films, and plays and performance pieces created for U.S. and Latin American stages. Rodríguez argues that these crimes may be one result of the ways in which political and criminal forces benefit from legal and illegal labor, especially in relationship to gender and labor in the *maquiladoras*. She doesn't hesitate to speculate about how the segregated culture of the *maquilas* created a zone where women and girls were made to walk through a world ripe with exploitative energy, surrounded by the frenzy of the factories themselves, with its daily grind on the women's bodies, as well as by the crime, drug traffic, pornography, and human sex trafficking that play out in the rapacious margins of cheap labor. It is to Rodríguez's credit as a writer that these final chapters sustain the moral charge of her arguments so well. She indicts late capitalism and liberalism itself for creating situations where poor women from the desert are lured to work for *maquilas* because of poverty and made vulnerable to a system that reviles their social class, ethnicity, and accents to such a degree that they become disposable—countless dead whose murders go unsolved and whose cases are closed by Mexican authorities that do not "value" them as citizens but see them as mere waste, as replaceable cogs in the machine of production and as cheap, binational labor.

Liberalism at Its Limits is a book that deserves to be widely read. While its focus is on Latin America, its discussion of crime, terror, and the situation of the subaltern resonates far beyond the region. In retrospect, one could argue that Rodríguez's description of Colombia as a "failed" state and Mexico as a "criminal" one is problematic, because the words themselves are so categorical as to deny other possibilities of nomenclature, which in turn limits her reading of these states. Nevertheless, this is a small caveat for what is a strong piece of scholarship and a provocative book that bears witness to dark times in a dark world.

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