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Abstract

Fighting Rebellion, Criminalizing Dissent: Governmental Responses to Political
Criminality in Mexico and Colombia, 1870s – 1910s

by

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Political Crimes represent one of the most neglected areas in the historical scholarship on modern Latin America. It is an enduring absence that, for decades, has prevented historians from developing richer understandings about the functioning of politics, the evolution of legal phenomena, and the workings of both war and peace in the region. This dissertation addresses this historiographical void through a comparative study of governmental responses to political criminality in Mexico and Colombia between the 1870s and the 1910s – years that frame the rise and fall of the Mexican Porfiriato and the Colombian Regeneration. A study of political, legal, and social history, this work explores and analyzes how governments in Mexico and Colombia understood and responded to political offenses such as treason, rebellion, and subversion. How legalistic were these responses? How respectful of the rule of law they were? What do these responses reveal about the logics of justice, state power and repression in late-nineteenth century Latin America? What do they tell about the relationships between state and citizens in the region? These are some of the questions the dissertation addresses.

Overall, the study argues that governmental responses to political criminality entailed different yet complementary purposes. First, they aimed to protect public order from episodes of rebellion and insurrection. Second, they had the goal of neutralizing the activities of dangerous dissidents. Third, they allowed governments to trace and retrace the limits between legitimate and criminal expressions of political dissent. Political crimes were a fluid and mutable criminal category that allowed authorities to prevent and fight rebellion and maintain dissenters under strict control. Responses to political crimes involved both legal and extralegal strategies, and often redefined the limits of what laws and constitutions considered valid regarding the state's actions against its own citizens. These redefinitions had different meanings and consequences in Mexico and Colombia, conditioning substantial differences in the legal and judicial experiences of political dissidents in each country.

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