

Book Review/Reseña

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Jenss, Alke. *Selective Security in the War on Drugs: The Coloniality of State Power in Colombia and Mexico*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023.

In *Selective Security in the War on Drugs*, Alke Jenss provides a postcolonial and decolonial reinterpretation of state theory, showing that the “war on drugs” has reinforced colonial systems of exclusion rooted in racialization and extractivist property regimes. Using critical political economy and relational state theory, she introduces the concept of selective security to explain how the state arises from and continually reproduces unequal social power relations. By comparing Colombia’s and Mexico’s war on drugs, Jenss shows how these policies cannot be understood merely as US-driven, nor can violence be reduced to narratives of institutional weakness. Instead, the war emerges as a project shaped by domestic actors who deploy coercion selectively to maintain racialized and classed hierarchies. Questioning these two assumptions about US-centrism and a “fragile state” represents the book’s most significant contribution.

Selective security, Jenss argues, is both structural and fluid: certain actors are empowered while others are criminalized and repressed; some policy proposals become institutionalized while others are discarded. The effects of this selectivity are visible in who the state recognizes as partners and who it relegates to the margins, including Indigenous and *campesino* communities in Colombia whose security claims are routinely dismissed. Jenss’s analysis resonates with scholarship on state coercion yet stands apart for its focus on coloniality. Racialized hierarchies and property relations continue to structure who receives protection, who is exposed to violence, and whose proposals for security are adopted by the state as policies.

The first part of the book (chapters 2 and 3) lays the historical and conceptual groundwork for this argument, explicitly drawing on Aníbal Quijano’s coloniality of power and Nicos Poulantzas’s critical account of coercion to link race, labor, and land as mutually reinforcing axes of domination. Jenss traces how colonial hierarchies of race and land

ownership, combined with global capitalist integration, shaped state formation in Colombia and Mexico in different ways. For example, the analysis shows the influence of the revolution on the creation of *ejidos* in Mexico (47–50) and contrasts this with Colombia's lack of large-scale land redistribution (36–39). Using historical scholarship, land tenure data, and regionally grounded case material, she concludes that, despite these differences, in both contexts the state has consistently protected private property held by lighter-skinned elites while normalizing the dispossession of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural mestizo communities.

Chapter 3 extends this analysis by challenging the Weberian idea of a state monopoly on violence and documenting how coercion has long been dispersed among local elites, paramilitaries, private armed actors, and other intermediaries. These alliances are not fixed but fluid. They shift as cooperation or confrontation between state and nonstate actors respond to electoral incentives, local power struggles, market opportunities, and territorial control. Together, these chapters operationalize Quijano's framework in a concrete, comparative way (53–56) and support the claim that coercion against racialized and rural populations during the height of the war on drugs was not merely institutional failure but a historically sedimented strategy supporting neoliberal policies.

Chapters 4 and 5 shift focus to the political economy and circulation of security doctrines from the 1970s through the early 2000s, when the modern framework of the war on drugs took shape. Chapter 4 breaks down the binary between legal and illegal markets, showing how neoliberal reforms, state deregulation, and weakened regulatory oversight, promoted as pro-investment, benefited both legal and illegal capital. Jenss argues that economic liberalization “encouraged illegal forms of accumulation with high profit margins, such as drug trafficking” (83), normalizing impunity for economic and political elites. Chapter 5 traces how security ideas traveled across borders, as Colombia's *seguridad democrática* and US-backed counterinsurgency models influenced Mexico's militarized campaigns. In both countries, the creation of an “internal enemy,” the guerrillero or the narco, justified exceptional measures and the suspension of rights, linking selective security to a broader hemispheric approach to punitive governance.

The following two chapters illustrate how these doctrines are translated into specific justice frameworks (chapter 6) and land regimes (chapter 7). Jenss interprets Colombia's Ley de Justicia y Paz (2005), Mexico's failed security law (2009), and contemporary land conflicts as examples where selective security is embedded in the law. Mass arrests, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial use of force become normalized signs of the state's “success,” while alliances between state and nonstate actors strengthen an authoritarian form of neoliberal legality that favors economic order over rights in Colombia (132–141) and Mexico (141–143). Connecting these security laws to property changes during the 2000s commodities boom, Jenss shows that selective security is not just a discursive

concept but also material: it influences who is imprisoned, displaced, and whose property is protected. Security policy, in this view, is not merely a tool the state uses; it defines the very nature of the state itself.

The concluding chapter presents the Colombian and Mexican trajectories to highlight their converging architectures of coercion. Both states underwent institutional reorganizations that concentrated resources in security apparatuses and legitimized military expansion while narrowing the scope for legal dissent. Despite distinct political narratives in Uribe's conservative project in Colombia and AMLO's ostensibly progressive administration in Mexico, coercive practices remain central to governance. Jenss persuasively argues that the war on drugs has functioned as a mechanism of state consolidation through selective security, perpetuating a racialized political economy of justice in which violence is both the instrument and the condition of authority.

A particularly notable contribution of *Selective Security* lies in its methodological approach. Jenss brings together: interviews with land activists, journalists, politicians, and lawyers; state planning and military documents; and materials such as WikiLeaks cables and files from the US National Security Archive. This triangulation shows that body-count metrics and coercive tactics against dissenting voices were deliberately designed strategies later codified in official directives and not only accidental by-products of the drug war. Comparing cases side by side, as Juliet Hooker suggests, without forcing them into the "most similar" or "most different" methods, highlights how shared colonial legacies generate distinct but convergent architectures of coercion. This methodological choice models a historically grounded, interpretive comparative politics for analyzing how states selectively distribute protection and punishment. The project's interdisciplinary reach, bridging political economy, critical security studies, decolonial theory, and sociolegal analysis, makes it valuable far beyond drug war scholarship and adaptable to other arenas of uneven access to the state, including access to justice, environmental enforcement, and the punitive regulation of marginalized groups.

Conceptually, the book advances postcolonial state theory by illustrating how racialized property regimes and colonial classifications of worth continue to influence who is considered protectable and who is deemed expendable. Jenss's approach challenges institutionalist reform agendas that treat security failures as technical design flaws rather than political choices embedded in a racialized political economy. For scholars of access to justice, the notion of *selective security* offers a precise analytic vocabulary to describe these uneven experiences, moving beyond explanations grounded in "weak institutions" or "state fragility."

These strengths also reveal where further work is needed. Because the book does not focus on formal institutional design, it opens space for future research connecting the political

economy of selective security to concrete hypotheses about how particular governance reforms might weaken entrenched structures of exclusion. Similarly, scholarship that examines how institutional designs, legislatures, courts, rights, and legal deliberative mechanisms can either constrain or enable punitive projects could benefit from deeper engagement with Jenss's arguments on state formation and selective security, for example, in studies of constitutional jurisprudence on security and rights. Readers interested in everyday legal mobilization may also seek a more sustained discussion of how communities contest selective security from below. These gaps highlight promising avenues for research on how colonial formations of power can be challenged through institutional, legal, and grassroots strategies, in drug policy and in other contentious arenas such as environmental regulation, gender-based violence, and territorial autonomy.

Selective Security in the War on Drugs is best suited for advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and specialized readers in Latin American politics, comparative politics, and critical security studies. Its historically grounded comparative design makes it an excellent text for upper-level courses that introduce students to interpretive approaches and to debates on state formation and violence. The book will also be of clear interest to practitioners working in human rights, drug policy, and security sector reform who seek to understand why, for many communities in the hemisphere, "security" continues to be experienced less as protection than as an instrument of dispossession and control.

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