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*Time, Power, and Resistances in Latin America:
Narratives, Democracy, and Global Reconfigurations
(English Version)*

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The Biopower and Necropower of the National Security Doctrine Guatemala and Chile (1963-1973)

El biopoder y necropoder de la Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional Guatemala y Chile (1963-1973)

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ABSTRACT

This research begins with a critique of traditional Cold War historiography in Latin America, which has privileged the geopolitical conflict between blocs and relegated its sociopolitical dimension. In response, it proposes to analyze the National Security Doctrine (NSD) not only as a military strategy, but as an ideological and political dispositif that reorganized the relationship between state, society, and violence, and that shaped internal security policies throughout Latin America. In particular, this study examines the cases of Guatemala and Chile in the context of the coups d'état of 1963 and 1973.

Keywords: National Security Doctrine; Biopower; Necropower; Guatemala; Chile.

RESUMEN

La investigación parte de una crítica a la historiografía tradicional de la Guerra Fría en América Latina, que ha privilegiado el conflicto geopolítico entre bloques y ha relegado su dimensión sociopolítica. En respuesta, se propone analizar la Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional (DSN) no solo como una estrategia militar, sino como un dispositivo ideológico y político que reorganizó el vínculo entre Estado, sociedad y violencia; y que articuló políticas de seguridad interna en toda América Latina, en particular en esta investigación se presentan los casos de Guatemala y Chile, en los contextos de los golpes de Estado de 1963 y 1973.

Palabras clave: Doctrina de Seguridad Nacional; Biopoder; Necropoder; Guatemala; Chile.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional historiography on the Cold War in Latin America has favored a reading focused on the geopolitical conflict between ideological blocs, in which Latin American states appear as secondary stages in a global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. This perspective, although useful for understanding the international dynamics of the period, has tended to obscure the concrete ways in which this conflict was embodied in internal power structures, state institutions, and, above all, in the bodies and lives of Latin American populations. In particular, it has relegated the sociopolitical dimension of the National Security Doctrine (DSN) to the background, understood not only as a military strategy but also as an ideological and political device that reorganized the link between the state, society, and violence.

This paper proposes a critical re-reading of the DSN as a device of biopower and necropolitics, taking as case studies the processes of militarization and repression in Guatemala and Chile between 1963 and 1973. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines history, sociology, and political philosophy, it seeks to show how the DSN operated as a technology of power that not only organized military repression but also produced regimes of life and death deeply inscribed in state logic. In this sense, the concepts of biopower (Michel Foucault) and necropolitics (Achille Mbembe) are taken up as analytical tools to understand how the Guatemalan and Chilean states managed the lives of their citizens—through health, education, census, and surveillance policies—while legitimizing the physical elimination of those considered “internal enemies.”

In presenting this reading, the paper seeks to contribute to a critical historiography that not only reconstructs the facts but also questions how power is inscribed in bodies, territories, and memories. Beyond denunciation, the aim is to open a space for thinking about how the technologies of authoritarian government continue to operate in the present ly in new forms, and how the recovery of these experiences can contribute to the construction of justice and dignity for the victims and their communities.

DEVELOPMENT

Biopower and the National Security Doctrine

Traditionally, the sovereign had absolute power to decide on the life and death of his subjects. This power was seen as an unquestionable privilege, grounded in the monarch’s divine or legal authority. Now the power to kill is no longer exercised as a demonstration of authority, but as a defense mechanism. This implies a transition from sovereign power to more modern forms of power, such as biopower, which “... refers to a power that is exercised positively over life, which seeks to manage it, increase it, multiply it, exercise precise controls and general regulations over it.” (Foucault, 1976, p. 165)

In other words, unlike sovereign power, which was exercised as the right to kill, biopower manifests itself as a policy of “making live” through mechanisms such as public health, education, urban planning, and security. Biopower is not limited to coercion, but produces subjects, normalizes behaviors, and organizes bodies within a logic of productivity and utility.

On the other hand, and following Laura Sala, the National Security Doctrine (DSN) has two historiographical aspects: the classical current, which conceives it as a homogeneous ideological body originating in the United States and adopted by the Latin American armed forces; and the critical current, which questions this systematicity and emphasizes the diverse origins and temporalities of its components, as well as the internal processes that enabled it. Representing the critical current, Leal Buitrago (2002) will say that “... the National Security Doctrine is a regional phenomenon, specifically South American, derived from external influence, but with considerable variation in its particular manifestations...”. Meanwhile, Valdés Tapia, representative of the classical school of thought, will say that “... the DSN is not a military doctrine for war, but a political doctrine for the military, conceived in the United States and aimed at motivating the pseudo-autonomous intervention of the Latin American military” (Valdés, 1980, as cited in Sala, 2022, p.6).

What is proposed here is that the National Security Doctrine, despite having been developed in an exogenous geopolitical framework, mainly influenced by the hemispheric security logic promoted by the United States, acquired a national character when it was reinterpreted and applied according to the interests, tensions, and realities of each country that adopted it.

Far from being a mechanical or uniform imposition, the DSN was shaped by local historical structures, particular political trajectories, and internal disputes that shaped its doctrinal appropriation at the national level.

In this sense, biopower is not exempt from violence: its logic of life management necessarily entails the exclusion of those bodies that do not conform to the parameters of normality, productivity, or security defined by the state. By incorporating life management into its mandate, the National Security Doctrine (DSN) transformed the state apparatus into an active producer of subjectivities. It is no longer just a matter of governing through laws or direct coercion, but of shaping the social fabric through distinctions between useful citizens and internal enemies, between protected and exposed bodies.

This doctrine, by linking national defense to internal surveillance, redefines sovereignty as the ability to decide not only on death but also on which lives are worth living. Under NSD, the state does not limit itself to identifying external threats: it constructs the enemy from within, based on ideological, racial, economic, or cultural criteria. Thus, biopower is intertwined with a classificatory violence that distributes vulnerability differentially: some bodies are medicalized, educated, and insured; others are criminalized, made invisible, or eliminated.

The DSN turns security into an organizing principle of social life, where the state not only protects but also produces exclusion. In this framework, violence is not an anomaly of the system but a structural condition of its functioning. Biopower, then, does not oppose the sovereign who decides on death but reconfigures it: now it is decided which lives should be intensified and which can be abandoned.

Necropower and the National Security Doctrine

It is time to give way to necropower, a concept stemming directly from necropolitics, both terms coined by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, who seeks to understand how power is exercised in Africa in the postcolonial era. He builds his ideas by broadening the perspective on the control exercised by the state over bodies, thus interpreting politics as a pursuit of death, sovereignty, and the state of exception: the right to kill. These conceptions relate to Michael Foucault's notion of biopolitics.

[...] the ultimate expression of sovereignty lies largely in the power and ability to decide who can live and who must die. Killing or letting live, therefore, constitutes the limits of sovereignty [...] Sovereignty consists of exercising control over mortality and defining life as the display and manifestation of power.

(Therefore)... Sovereignty (is defined) as the right to kill. [...] the state of exception and the relationship of enmity [violence] have become the normative basis of the right to kill. (Mbembe, 2011, pp. 21-25)

Necropolitics is not simply state violence, but a rationality that turns death into a tool of government. In contexts of war, occupation, or dictatorship, the state produces zones of death, disposable bodies, and expendable populations, legitimizing extermination as part of its security logic.

With all of the above, it can be argued that the National Security Doctrine (DSN), in its concrete application in Latin America, functioned as a necropolitical technology in the sense proposed by Achille Mbembe: a form of power that not only regulates life, but also actively

decides on death, on which bodies can be sacrificed in the name of sovereignty, order, and security. In this framework, the state ceases to be solely an administrator of life—as Foucault proposes in his notion of biopower—and becomes an agent of legitimate death, capable of producing zones of exception where violence becomes structural, systematic, and legally justified.

The DSN redefines the concept of the enemy: it is no longer an external threat, but an internal enemy, a figure discursively constructed as the bearer of a radical otherness that jeopardizes the integrity of the body politic. This construction enables the suspension of constitutional guarantees and the implementation of extermination practices under the pretext of national defense. In Mbembe's terms, the state arrogates to itself the right to decide who can live and who must die, establishing regimes of violence that exceed disciplinary logic and are inscribed in an economy of death.

In Guatemala, this necropolitical logic translated into systematic massacres against indigenous communities, considered not only as “ideological enemies” but as racialized bodies whose very existence was incompatible with the nation-building project promoted by the military elites. Forced disappearances, the militarization of rural territories, and the destruction of community structures were not excesses, but coherent expressions of a necropolitical rationality that articulated security, race, and territory.

For example, in the Mutual Support Group (GAM) report: *The study Massacres in Guatemala*. The cries of an entire people document more than 1,112 acts of violence, many perpetrated by state forces against indigenous communities. The report reveals how the Mayan people were racialized as “internal enemies” and victims of a dirty war that justified extermination in the name of national security.

In Chile, the DSN manifested itself in the creation of clandestine detention centers, the institutionalization of torture, and extrajudicial executions. The discourse of “national defense” operated as a device to legitimize violence that sought not only to eliminate dissidents physically but also to destroy their subjectivity, erase their memory, and dismantle any possibility of resistance. Here, the state does not only kill: it produces disposable bodies, lives that do not deserve mourning, existences that can be eliminated without scandal.

An example of this is the Rettig report of the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which documented more than 3 000 cases of forced disappearance and political execution. The DSN justified the creation of clandestine centers such as Villa Grimaldi, where systematic torture was practiced. These practices were not isolated excesses but part of a state policy to eliminate dissenters.

Mbembe allows us to understand that necropolitics is not an anomaly within the modern state but a latent possibility actualized when sovereignty is articulated with fear, racialization, and the logic of internal war. The DSN, in this sense, was not simply a military doctrine: it was a device of death that reconfigured the relationship between power, life, and violence on the continent.

This is not to say that necropolitics does not oppose biopower, but rather that it complements it: while biopower administers life, necropolitics decides on death. Both are part of the same apparatus that organizes existence according to criteria of utility, loyalty, and threat. By

articulating these two logics, the DSN produced a political order in which the state not only protected but also exterminated, not only educated but also disappeared.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it can be said that biopower manifested itself through the administration of populations deemed “loyal” or “productive” through mechanisms such as health, education, censuses, and surveillance. This management of life was neither neutral nor benevolent: it involved the classification of bodies, the normalization of behaviors, and the systematic exclusion of those who did not conform to the parameters defined by the state. In both countries, biopower operated as a facade of modernization, while structures of control and social discipline were consolidated.

For its part, necropolitics—in the Mbembian sense—revealed the most radical dimension of state power: the ability to decide who should die, who can be sacrificed, and which bodies can be eliminated without mourning or scandal. The DSN enabled this logic by constructing the “internal enemy,” a figure that allowed for the suspension of constitutional guarantees, the militarization of everyday life, and the implementation of systematic practices of extermination.

The articulation between biopower and necropolitics should not be understood as a contradiction, but as a functional complementarity within the DSN apparatus. While biopower produces useful subjects, necropolitics eliminates bodies considered dangerous or superfluous. Both operate in a political economy of life and death, where the state becomes the manager of existence and the agent of extermination. This logic extends beyond the military sphere and penetrates civil institutions, public discourse, and everyday government practices.

From a critical historiographical perspective, this analysis enabled questioning narratives that have reduced the Latin American Cold War to a conflict between ideological blocs, obscuring the concrete ways in which power was inscribed in bodies, territories, and memories. The DSN was not just a military strategy: it was a technology of power that transformed social life, redefined sovereignty, and legitimized violence as an organizing principle of the political order.

Finally, recovering these experiences from an interdisciplinary perspective not only contributes to the reconstruction of historical memory but also opens up a space for thinking about contemporary forms of authoritarian government, racialization, and exclusion. The technologies of power consolidated under the DSN have not disappeared; they have been reconfigured into new forms, often more subtle but equally effective. Therefore, the study of biopower and necropolitics in the Latin American context is not only an academic task but an exercise in epistemic and political justice, aimed at making visible the lives that were managed, sacrificed, and silenced in the name of national security.

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