SUMMARY - CHAPTER 10

A Right to Have Rights in the New Democracies

In most Latin American countries the law has been perceived, typically, as expressing the ideal of justice. Traditionally the execution of that justice has been removed from the legal ideal, and people have become used to this reality. But in the aftermath of the dirty wars there was a need to reassess this relationship between the ideal of justice and the execution of justice. There was a general call for a system that would respect and honor the legal rights enshrined in the laws of all Latin American countries.

Mothers, Sisters, Daughters

When thousands of young people began to disappear and became unaccounted for, as the Argentine government clamped down on opposition, the mothers of these missing persons mounted an unassuming demonstration in the Plaza de Mayo. The demonstrations began to amass more and more mothers as a general awareness began to emerge that the disappearance of the youths was a widespread problem. Eventually these demonstrations gained national and international recognition and helped to exert pressure on the government to investigate human right breaches in the case of the disappearances.

In the wake of this success story, the Madres (mothers) threw their support behind other causes in an attempt to bring a general awareness to other pressing issues in Argentine society. Eventually, internal class and ideological differences caused the Madres to splinter. However, their protest tactics, especially their exploitation of the media, were appropriated by other similarly disempowered groups all over Latin America.

Life, Liberty, and Security

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the urban centers of Latin American cities began to swell with migrants lured by the promise of work and an improved standard of living. These migrant populations contributed greatly to the economic expansion of the cities. But in the 1970s, as those same cities were hit by economic crises, jobs dried up. Social services, which the government had set up to absorb the influx of migrant workers, were eliminated. It was in this environment that the drug trade, which would come to be associated with Latin American, began to take root and take off.

The drug traffickers were admired, because they used the revenue that they generated from foreign consumption in revitalizing the infrastructure of Latin American societies. They built schools, hospitals, and residential projects.

Eventually, the local governments, which were charged with combating the drug trade, became, instead, deeply entangled in it. Corruption increased, and the security of citizens was compromised. With less serious policing emerged more street-gangs that terrorized the population with increasingly violent
criminal activity. All this has led to a popular perception of Latin American police forces as corrupt cronies of the criminal underworld.

In Mexico, the drug cartels exercise a massive power over Mexican society. And, in spite of a huge government campaign to cut off the power of the cartels, their criminal reign continues almost unimpeded. They achieve this primarily through scare tactics, as they have routinely terrorized military and government officials into submitting to their demands. The continued presence of the cartels in Mexican society is not only a threat to the policing forces, but also to the individual, who finds himself sometimes trapped in the crossfire; or even treated as a pawn in a game played by the cartels and the government.

**Migrant Rights?**

As economic conditions worsened in most Latin American countries toward the end of the twentieth century, many Latin Americans have been lured by the dream of a better future in a country far-removed from the internal problems of their native lands. But the logistics of a large body of people immigrating to another country, and integrating that body into a completely different society, pose huge challenges that have ultimately made immigration a very sensitive international issue.

Almost half a million Mexicans immigrate to the US every year. They constitute a very substantial cultural component in American society now. However, there are many undocumented immigrants who enter the US illegally, and for this group there are a whole slew of legal issues that they must deal with on both sides of the border. That is to say that their illegal status problematizes their citizenship both in their home country and in their adopted home. In spite of many calls for reform to immigration rights (from both Mexico and US political factions), the US continues to adopt a hard-line policy when it comes to illegal immigration. And now, in the wake of 9/11 and the gradual erosion of civil rights, there is less sympathy for the plight of illegal migrants.

**The Document: Border Crossings**

1. The *Migrant Guide*: published by the Mexican government, this was a guide that showed the potential illegal migrant what they needed to know in order survive crossing the border illegally into the US. It came in the form of a comic book, instructing its readers more so with images than with words. The guide caused a stir in the US, even as the Mexican government distanced itself from the publication, claiming that someone had “dropped the ball.”