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La Lucha: the illustrated story of Human Right defenders and their struggle in Mexico

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La Lucha, the Story of Lucha Castro and Human Rights in Mexico, Jon Sack. London: Verso, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-78168-801-4 (paperback) £9.99 Pp. 96 + xv.

“The War on Drugs served as a smokescreen to eliminate opponents and other critical voices... voices that make the government uncomfortable: journalists, human rights defenders and political leaders” (*Saúl Reyes Salazar, La Lucha, p.81*)

Over the last decade, we have been intoxicated with horror stories coming from Mexico: tattooed gangsters raping and murdering at will, young initiates in the drug-cartels drinking blood after gruesome ritual murders, the ubiquitous appearance of mutilated body parts, coupled with the rising cult of

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Saint Death, evoke the transition, in the international imaginary, from the amenable neighbour “south of the border” to the paradigm of the ultimate nightmare republic. Violence is depicted as excessive, chaotic, unexplainable, gratuitous, springing out from that innate savagery of the untamed barbarian inside of the heart of Mexico. Violence is, supposedly, inscribed in the DNA of Mexicans, part and parcel of their culture since times immemorial, when they ripped out the hearts of yelling victims in sacrificial temples under the gaze of blood-thirsty gods, only partially stamped-out the face of Earth by the advent of a half-digested Christianity. Why violence and mayhem have escalated over the last decade, what are the powerful interests behind them and what is their link to the broader political landscape in the Western Hemisphere is something that, alas, often escapes this generalized media portrayal.

But a more nuanced and informed explanation of the acute social conflicts in Mexico and the violence associated to them, is not the only missing story in the news coverage. The story of millions of brave people who organise and struggle day by day, in order to confront violence and the social inequities at the heart of it, receive infinitely less attention than the gory details of the snuff-press. That is why Verso’s publication of this accessible graphic novel, written and skilfully drawn by **Jon Sack**, is a breadth of fresh air and a most welcome contribution to high-lighting these neglected but crucial aspects of the story of Mexico. This is the first in a series dedicated to Human Rights Defenders which will be produced by Verso in association with the Ireland-based Human Rights’ organisation **Front Line Defenders**. The massive tragedy which has been called the Mexican “War on Drugs” with all of their victims, powerful sponsors and actors, clashes of interests, with its structural links to corruption and social conflicts, deserves a respectful, dignified and sober account and this is an exceedingly valuable contribution in that direction. As we read page

after page, the illustrated stories of these activists and organisers, this book helps us move from mere shock into inspiration.

To be true, violence is a massive problem in Mexico and scores of thousands of people have been murdered in atrocious circumstances –almost 100,000 people since former president Felipe Calderón declared an ill-conceived “War on Drugs” in late 2006... plus 20,000 who have been disappeared and 200,000 who had to flee from terror, entire towns near the US border being left as virtual ghost-towns. Sometimes death has knocked to the doors of people we knew and loved, such as Bety Carriño, the brave indigenous human rights’ defender from Oaxaca, murdered by right-wing paramilitary thugs in San Juan Copala, on April 27th, 2010, together with the Finnish human rights’ activist Jyri Jaakkola. She had been twice in Ireland, invited first by LASC in 2009, then by Front Line Defenders, where she made her last public speech a mere two months before being assassinated. She was an inspiration to everyone who knew her personally, yet, the mainstream media were too busy covering the ‘chaotic’ and ‘endemic’ violence of the drug-cartels to pay much attention to the murder of Bety. This murder was linked directly to the generalised atmosphere of political repression in Oaxaca and to thugs linked to the governor of that department, the hugely-unpopular Ulises Ruiz –probably it was one of those murders that just wouldn’t sell for the media.

But *La Lucha* tells us the story of many more who we did not know personally, but who are part of the same movement of people reclaiming their dignity at opprobrious times when elites have intended to deprive the people even of this. The book is a collection of short stories of Human Rights defenders, articulated around the experience of Lucha Castro, hence the name for the book. *Lucha*, in Spanish, means “struggle” but it is also an endearment term for Luz, the real name of this Human Rights activist who has been at the front of the **Centre for the Human Rights of Women** (*Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres*) in Chihuahua, near the border with the US and

one of the deadliest regions in the world. The book tells the stories of various Human Rights Defenders and the huge personal price they have had to pay for living up to their commitment. Among them, we find the stories of different Human Rights defenders, mostly women, but also men, who have fought over for justice in a country where impunity is rampant. That most murders, massacres and disappearances remain in absolute impunity, is a grim scenario for Human Rights activist. Particularly horrific is violence against women, which has escalated a meteoric 400% since 2008, which responds to the multiple oppressions that women face on a daily basis, but which has spiralled out of control in a context of generalised violence and abuse.

La Lucha exposes the way in which authorities and the public force have often cooperated with the mafia, and how the prevalent atmosphere of blatant illegality is a useful smoke-screen to carry on social control and repression in order to strengthen the grip of the elite in the country and to advance their own economic interests. One story in the book that really made me physically sick, was that of the Reyes Salazar family who was nearly exterminated with army complicity, during the military occupation of Guadalupe in 2008. It was one of the members of this family who said that “*The War on Drugs served as a smokescreen to eliminate opponents and other critical voices... voices that make the government uncomfortable: journalists, human rights defenders and political leaders*”. It is no coincidence that the so-called War on Drugs came to Mexico in late 2006, precisely in the context of a deep crisis within the ruling block of that country –the Zapatistas had launched their new political front around their Sixth declaration, Oaxaca had been shaken by many months of popular power and protests led by the Popular Assemblies of the People’s of Oaxaca (APPO) movement and by the mass demonstrations calling the election of Felipe Calderón a fraud. Violence has managed to serve as a potent mechanism of social control in this scenario.

The main of the many merits of this book is that it tries to make sense of the violence in Mexico. It also contextualises it in the conflictive border relations with the US- where most of the guns that kill Mexicans are coming from anyway. The first story, indeed, portrays the interactions at a border crossing point. But *La Lucha* also, celebrates the courage of the thousands of human rights defenders in Mexico who, with the solid support from their communities, face the new model of political repression and social control which brings together the public force and political elites, together with the booming mafia economy. Years ago, an activist, when asked about the brutality of many murders in Mexico, was quick to respond: if we live brutal lives, if we are despised and treated with contempt, if we have no access to the basics that guarantee a dignified life, if we toil under a brutal regime of exploitation... is it any wonder that we are killed in such a brutal way? Unfortunately, the sensationalist media is more concerned about how Mexicans are killed rather than to enquire on how Mexicans live. *La Lucha* is a good anti-dote to this tendency and to start understanding the struggle of those Mexican Human Rights defenders, like Lucha Castro, who believe that “*another world is possible, another world without violence*”.