Ultimately, if the volume’s tone feels ever so slightly out of time, this only confirms that Havana has never been “stuck in time,” as an abundance of photography and coffee-table books would have us believe. Havana Beyond the Ruins provides an excellent, multivalent, elegiac, often eloquent portrait of where Cuba’s capital has been and where it may be going. Avoiding definitive answers, prompting reflection more than impulse judgment, Birkenmaier and Whitfield’s collection testifies to a city sitting at the threshold of something new, whose contours are only just starting to be defined.

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This book is a study of security and community justice in a recently-settled barrio of Cochabamba, in Bolivia. It is engaging, well-written, honest, and illuminating; and it is extremely rich in the debates that it tackles. A short review cannot do full justice to its wealth of ideas and arguments, so instead I present reflections on some key elements.

On the surface, Outlawed is the result of a well-designed research project where a team of ethnographers have asked people in a marginal barrio of Cochabamba what they think about concepts of security, community justice and human rights. The book puts these perspectives into dialogue with a critical discussion of those discourses as they operate transnationally. This leads to an excellent exploration of how debates about security have developed over the last few decades, combined with an attempt to marry the different levels of security discourse into a coherent analysis – no small feat. We are told how ‘security’ has achieved prominence as a political discourse, for international development agencies in the post-9/11 environment, but also within a region-specific history of how Latin American dictatorships described and tackled ‘public order’. The focus though is on understandings of insecurity in poor urban neighbourhoods.

Goldstein also discusses the attempts to add an analysis of economic insecurity to the very narrow association of insecurity with vulnerability to crime. I agree with him that it is extremely important to outline some of the ways that poverty creates all kinds of vulnerability and uncertainty. That said, although he does appear to have found some evidence of these broader interpretations of ‘security’ among informants, they are rather buried beneath the dominant discourse of crime-related insecurity. Although Goldstein slightly pulls back from arguing
this explicitly, an implication of his discussion is that ‘security’ discourse should probably be interpreted as a reaction to the post-1989 dominance of human rights discourses. As a result, even among non-elite populations, ‘security’ has now successfully trumped ‘human rights’ as the latter are interpreted only as the protection of the rights of detainees and therefore implicated in the perpetuation of situations of urban crime and insecurity.

Beyond an examination of local understandings of transnationally-powerful concepts, Goldstein also puts forward a powerfully critical perspective on the operations of the state in the neighbourhoods studied. Although many people – NGO workers, the residents themselves – think that the state has ‘abandoned’ them, in fact, he shows that it is an ‘absent presence’, a ‘spectre’. The state is there, but intermittently: the law ought to be observed but is often subverted, by police officers who require payment before investigating a case, or by delinquents who are released for lack of evidence. The state is also found in the bureaucratic requirements that may suddenly become necessary to get a loan, bury a dead child, prevent someone else from occupying your house or land, and so on. Yet the residents are made illegal in multiple ways; they are ‘out-lawed’.

One consequence is that they are forced to ‘make justice’, that is, to protect themselves against another ‘spectral presence’, the thief who preys upon poor people, and one way of doing so is by lynching. I’m not so convinced by the discussion of connections that people made between lynchings and ‘community justice’ as conceived in the Bolivian constitution and by NGO actors. But the descriptions of lynchings themselves are extremely powerful, especially because of the emphasis on ambiguity and uncertainty. It is clear that many people in the crowd seek a way out from perpetrating violence upon the thief, and importantly they may do so by appealing to local leaders to sort out their disputes. This applies to more than only exceptional events, and so community justice as it actually exists is dependent upon the initiative and creativity of local leaders. Hence legal pluralism should not be imagined as the coexistence of different but reasonably coherent systems, including the official one. Community justice actually consists of ad hoc responses to events, perhaps based upon some generally agreed upon principles, but subject (of course) to constant change and invention. In fact, perhaps we could say that community justice is not law, but politics.

Community justice is, Goldstein argues, an important aspect of the current government’s relationship to indigeneity, and he makes creative use of it to make some critical points about indigeneity and rurality. He argues that community justice is viewed as somehow purer in the campo, and non-existent in urban indigenous areas, where there is only chaos. As in the past, dominant discourse only grants indigenous identity in rural spaces, it just happens that the relative value placed upon the rural-indigenous identity has now been inverted. Urban
indigenous peoples again fall through the discursive cracks. Incidentally, the turn towards community justice may have been connected to shifts in the possibilities for activism in favour of indigenous autonomy after mid-1990s neoliberal multiculturalism. I remember around 1998 some pro-indigenous NGO workers telling me that this was one of the only spaces within the Banzer government where they could work, at a time when the implementation of the Law of Popular Participation—so associated with the previous government—had stalled.

Returning to the marginal barrios of Cochabamba, one leader, Don Miguel, was clearly central to the research described in this book. He tells of the time when a suspected thief had been captured in a neighbouring zone, and the crowd could not decide what to do with him so they eventually called Don Miguel. His solution was to telephone the thief’s mother, and she came to punish her child, and save his life. Repeatedly, we see that local residents consider only outsiders to be possible thieves, and potential thieves are often exonerated if they can be placed in a network of relations, whether known or not. Although Goldstein argues forcefully for strong currents of individualisation within the urban barrios, it is nonetheless important for urban residents to give people a context that consists of emplacing them in a network of other people. Thus another fantastic insight emerges from the ethnography.

So, there is lots to think about here. Goldstein has done an excellent job of discussing different interpretations of some very important concepts, but a better job—in my view—of giving space for some other rather wonderful ethnographic insights to emerge. The book beautifully discusses local political dynamics such as tensions around feeling unified, the relationship to the state, questions of how ‘known’ someone is and what that means for whether they are likely to be a criminal, and the importance of leadership. These insights are coupled with admirable honesty about the challenges of conducting this kind of research, and the nature of ‘engaged anthropology’. It is an extremely rich study, and will be of considerable use to those teaching and studying Latin American politics and law on the ground.

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En tanto ideología dominante en Argentina entre mediados del siglo XIX—después de la caída de Juan Manuel de Rosas—y 1930, el liberalismo ha sido un objeto de estudio privilegiado por historiadores políticos y de las ideas. Jorge