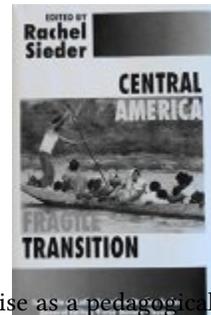


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rachel Sieder, ed. *Central America: Fragile Transition*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xviii + 298 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-16010-4.

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This volume is the product of a series of meetings during 1994 at the Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of London. It addresses problems in the transitions from war to peace and from military to democratic rule in Central America, problems which have resonance in Latin America and in newly emerging democracies across the world. At the same time, this book focuses narrowly on the Central American cases (Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, and Honduras; Costa Rica is omitted on comparative grounds), and this makes this book most useful for courses on the politics of that region or Latin America in general. Each chapter provides some form of comparative discussion of these national cases; most treat the period up to 1994, and only a few mention developments in 1995. The work is thus already somewhat dated, given recent political developments in the region, but the contributions are still of value in providing synopses of the situation up to that point. The value of such a book lies in its potential for providing factual base-line information on Central America, and there is utility of this material in teaching principles and theories of comparative politics and of transitions to democracy.

The book is composed of seven chapters organized into three sections: actors, institutions, and the international dimension. In section one, Rodolfo Cerdas Cruz considers parties and party systems, James Dunkerley and Rachel Sieder the military, and Diana Pritchard the role of refugees and the refugee crisis. The first two are competent surveys of the material, though a much more explicit comparative framework would have been more useful for students and faculty alike. They tended to be primarily descriptive and narrative, and emphasize the heterogeneity among Central American nations. Dunkerley, Sieder, and Pritchard organize their discussion of the cases on a high-to-low scale of demilita-

zation, a device which holds promise as a pedagogical value in demonstrating how comparative work is done. Pritchard's chapter, probably the most ambitious in the volume, considers the social consequences of the civil wars in the region, the political effects of massive displacement and the creation of migrant and refugee communities across the region's permeable frontiers, and looks at the role of the refugee question in bringing about the peace. Pritchard's discussion is stimulating not only in its coverage of the Central American experience, but also in its potential contribution to the literature on transitions as a whole and for comparable processes in Africa and Asia.

The following two chapters consider "institutional" developments in the region: Ricardo Cordova Macias discusses executive-legislative relations, and Sieder and Patrick Costello consider the judiciary. Cordova Macias discusses Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, but does so very unevenly, and without much of a comparative analysis. Indeed there is little done to connect the cases, and about midway, it shifts from the analytical to the descriptive in outlining the reform agenda for parties, congress, and elections in El Salvador and Guatemala; there are serious organizational problems which stem from a lack of a clear and consistent focus. Sieder and Costello avoid the Nicaraguan case (which would have been a very interesting and fruitful comparison), and consider the role of the judiciary in relation to human rights and democratization; they provide a comparative analysis, point to the international factors promoting change in this institution, and (tantlizingly) hint at the link between judicial reform and the imperatives generated by structural adjustment programs.

The final two chapters (by Laurence Whitehead on

the role of international actors, particularly the US, and by Stephen Baranyi on the role of the UN) add a needed international dimension to the national focus of the previous chapters. Whitehead provides a discussion driven by comparisons and counterfactuals, and thus contributes the best of the essays in the volume. He also discusses Central American developments through the lens of the workings of the US domestic political system, and thereby successfully fuses domestic-international and regional-global dimensions.

Like all edited volumes, this book suffers from an uneven quality in the various chapters. Rachel Sieder's introduction and conclusion offer only a sketchy overview, and a minimal framework to unify them. There is little pretension by the contributors of offering new theoretical insights, and the book is fairly jargon-free: it is thus potentially good for undergraduates who have limited exposure to theories of comparative politics, transitions to democracy, or Latin America in general. Individual chapters are very useful for providing historical information, and demonstrating analytical and comparative strategies (especially Pritchard, Dunkerley/Sieder and Whitehead). The merits of these individual chapters make the book useful as a reference tool or resource. This volume is best used (in upper division courses on Central American politics) alongside a more general and historical introductory work and a range of more current materials to provide a regional overview for a detailed and

nuanced assessment of particular nations using specialized case materials.

On the negative side of the balance, there are drawbacks for the academic community: the minimal engagement with the now extensive literature on transitions in Latin America, Africa, and Eastern Europe is distressing. The chapters selected also do not systematically discuss critical actors in the transition process (although they are mentioned in passing at various points): the economic elite, the church, and popular sector actors. The net effect is to make the work not very useful for the informed reader. These weaknesses also undermine the potential instructional properties of the work, and the book as a whole is not appropriate for illustrating general patterns from a comparative standpoint, or for providing current information on the Central American situation. There is a sense in which many of the contributors do not engage with alternative explanations or theoretical accounts of the material, and this will probably not make for stimulating discussions in class. It is not a work about which undergraduates will become very excited. Finally, the high (almost astronomical!) price of the book militates against its adoption.

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