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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jorge I. Domínguez, Marc Lindenberg, eds. *Democratic Transitions in Central America*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. xi + 210 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1486-9.

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Published on H-LatAm (September, 1997)



One of the central concerns in Latin American studies over the past five years has been the tide of democratisation that has swept the continent. This is hardly surprising given the extent of the changes that have occurred. At the end of the 1970s, the term *democracy* was not one that was associated with Latin America. Military regimes and authoritarian governments were in control in most of the countries of the region. By the middle of the 1990s, this situation has changed dramatically with the appearance of democratically elected governments throughout the region. This tidal wave of democracy has been matched by an equal flood of books analysing the changes, the reason for the changes, and the prospects for the successful transition to democracy. These books have either looked at the region as a whole (e.g. Ronaldo Munch, 1989, *Latin America: The Transition to Democracy*, Zed Books), or have concentrated on the events in one particular country (e.g. J Patrice McSherry, 1997, *Incomplete Transition: Military Power and Democracy in Argentina*, St Martin's Press). Central America as a region has also been previously discussed with reference to this issue (Rachel Sieder, ed, 1996, *Central America: Fragile Transition*, Macmillan). Given the attention already devoted to this issue, is there a need for yet another contribution to this paper mountain?

The editors of the work under review would clearly answer "yes." The processes of democratisation in Central America require their own analyses. As a result of the complex social struggles which reached crisis point during the 1980s, the move towards democracy is built upon different, and apparently more extreme, sets of social relations than in the Southern Cone. Democracy in the isthmus seems more tenuous, more fraught with problems than in the rest of the region. For this reason, the

study of this region in its own right has merit.

However, the main claim to originality of this volume is that, instead of being the work of academics, it is written by practitioners. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, all the country-based chapters have been produced by people who played a major part in the events described.

The book emerges from a study launched by the World Peace Foundation. This study is "aimed at discerning the patterns in the transition process in the region and at drawing from the experience some broader lessons that would be valuable for the future" (p. x). There is a stress on the role of individual actors in the transition process. For this reason, the decision was made to approach individuals to carry out an analysis of what had happened in their countries. Two problems are acknowledged with this strategy. The busy schedules of a number of the public figures approached meant that they had to drop out of the project, leaving a number of gaps. As a result, there are no chapters on Honduras or Costa Rica. The second problem is perhaps more difficult. This is the issue of objectivity. The extent of the social divisions in Central America inevitably means that there is more than one story to be told. To overcome this problem, an attempt was made to include more than one participant from each country. In the example of Nicaragua, a Sandinista Commandante (Jaime Wheelock), and the president of the Central Bank and his advisor (Silvio de Franco and Jose Luis Velazquez) provide, unsurprisingly, very different accounts of events in that country over the past twenty years. Despite this attempt to overcome lack of objectivity, multiple accounts are only provided for Nicaragua and Guatemala. Additionally, in the case of

Guatemala, the two accounts provided hardly bridge the political spectrum, though one is from a civilian and one is from a member of the military.

Additionally, it was hoped that the introduction and conclusion would possibly provide a degree of objectivity which the individual contributions might perhaps lack. The introduction, by Jorge Dominguez, Professor of Government at Harvard, concentrates on a number of key elements that the examples in the book share in common. With regard to launching the process of democratisation, these are: the role of force in setting off the democratisation process; the transition from authoritarian states to democratic states; the role of international actors (specifically the United States); and the impact of economic crisis. Dominguez also considers the factors which provide a degree of certainty which allows the introduction of democracy to continue—for example, the creation of new institutions (especially in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua) which gave the population confidence that elections would take place legally.

Following the introduction, there are six country specific chapters: two on Guatemala and Nicaragua, and one each on Panama and El Salvador. Reading these chapters back-to-back, it is striking how different the circumstances are which have led to the introduction of democracy in Central America. There certainly does not appear to be a Central American path to democracy. In Panama, it was imposed by the invading U.S. forces. In Nicaragua, depending on whose version is accepted, it was the result of the overthrowing of the Somoza dictatorship (according to Wheelock), or the result of external pressure on the Sandinistas to hold elections (de Franco & Velazquez). In Guatemala, there was a move from within the army to pass control of the Government to civilians. In El Salvador, stalemate between the army and the revolutionary forces eventually brought both sides to the negotiating table.

The conclusion assesses the prospects for the survival of democracy in each of the countries discussed and makes some suggestions for how the process could be consolidated and speeded-up.

A central problem with the book is that the scope of these chapters varies extensively. Although the authors were given a common set of questions to address, it is not clear that they have addressed these or been pressured to address them. This makes meaningful comparisons between the case studies much harder to make. The authors with an economics background have tended to produce more of an economic history than a political one. In the

chapter on Nicaragua by de Franco and Velazquez, there is almost exclusive focus on what are perceived to be the economic mistakes of the previous Sandinista Government. In the chapter on Panama, Ardto-Barletta, a former World Bank vice president, focuses on economic policy both during his time as president, and afterwards.

Only one of the chapters by the practitioners could, perhaps, be described as analytical. Paiz-Andrade, finance minister of Guatemala from 1986-89 and a professor at the Instituto Centroamericano de Administracion de Empresas, likens the process of building democracy to the construction of a bridge. A number of beams have to be in place before the process can be said to be achieved: the establishment of national values; the institution of the electoral process; an institutional framework; macro-economic orientation towards global integration; a societal orientation towards the development of the population; a peaceful societal environment; and an international orientation moving from isolation to globalisation. This framework aids an understanding of the complex developments in Guatemala.

The framework identified by Paiz-Andrade highlights a further weakness of the book. With the exception of his chapter, there is very little discussion of what “democracy” actually is. It is assumed that there is a common understanding of what constitutes democracy. As with much of the literature on democratisation in Latin America, “democracy” is a given, and seen as inherently a “good thing.” There is a concentration on the institutions and mechanisms perceived to comprise “democracy” rather than a consideration of what benefits might accrue to the population through democratisation. The model of democracy that appears to be assumed in much of these discussions is the Western-Liberal model. There is no acknowledgement of other models, or that other forms of democracy (such as democracy in the workplace) might be possible or even perhaps more appropriate for many countries in Latin America. Indeed, there is, so far, little evidence that democratisation has achieved much in reversing long standing social injustice in Latin America. Instead, elite structures appear to have been entrenched, whilst the situations of the most disadvantaged have worsened. Unless the models of democracy adopted can address such issues, then the prospects for its survival are reduced. In the meantime, it is essential to problematise the form that democracy is taking in Latin America and to assess the possibility of the provision of wider social justice.

Finally, to return to the issue of objectivity. This is

clearly a problem with this kind of undertaking and is acknowledged by the sponsors of the project. However, the steps that they have taken to minimize the problem are not very successful. The chapters do appear to be somewhat self-serving. Two of the authors had close links to the military, but, perhaps understandably, appear to be very reluctant to make criticisms of some of the activities by members of the armed forces (particularly in Guatemala). The chapter by DeFranco & Velazquez seems more interested in criticising the Sandinista Government than analysing democracy. Even the literacy campaign, frequently held up as a model of grassroots education, is depicted as an attempt to homogenise the population ideologically. If the intention was that the introduction and conclusion should provide a degree of objectivity, then the academics have appeared to be reluctant to take on this role. There is little sense of them holding the ring against competing narratives. The conclusion draws little upon the preceding chapters to make

its arguments, let alone discuss the views that have been presented.

In short, this is a fascinating but flawed experiment. The attempt to get Latin American voices into the analysis of democratisation is to be welcomed. However, the politicians chosen for this volume are too close to the action, and have particular interests to protect and promote. The book could be of use for courses on democratisation in Latin America, and the two chapters on Nicaragua would make the basis of a lively seminar discussion. However it is unlikely that a deeper awareness of the issues involved in the processes of democratisation will be gained from the use of this book.

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Citation: Steve Hobden. Review of Dominguez, Jorge I.; Lindenberg, Marc, eds., *Democratic Transitions in Central America*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

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