H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip J. Williams, Knut Walter. *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. ix + 244 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4041-8.

Reviewed by Douglas R. Keberlein-Gutierrez

Published on H-LatAm (November, 1998)

Although the armed forces historically have been key political actors throughout Latin America, scholars have been disinclined to conduct systematic studies of the Central American militaries. Interest in the subject blossomed only after leftist revolutionary movements appeared in the 1960s and triggered counterinsurgency campaigns across the isthmus. Unfortunately, prolonged armed conflict in the region resulted in restrictive government policies concerning access to information about the armed forces. As such, despite heightened interest among researchers, scholarly production has been lacking. Now, with the publication of *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy*, scholars will have reason to believe that future research efforts will not only be more numerous, but more fruitful as well.

Adopting a "consciously historical-structural perspective," Philip Williams and Knut Walter set out to analyze the "constraints or opportunities for transforming civil-military relations" in El Salvador (p. 3). The authors introduce their book with a fairly standard historiographical essay concerning the different approaches and key concepts used in studying the armed forces in Latin America. This includes a brief summary of the fundamental questions regarding military intervention in politics and disengagement. However, Williams and Walter express their preference for the broader concepts of militarization and demilitarization for studying democratic transitions. Borrowing from the work of Michael Lowy and Eder Sader, as well as Felipe Aguero, [1] they define militarization as the superimposition of the armed forces' will upon society and the entire political apparatus. Accordingly, demilitarization is much more than simply the military's return to the barracks or the elimination of its direct presence in politics. It includes limiting the military's "institutional prerogatives," its "tutelary power" in politics, and its ability to exercise social control (p. 8). In other words, the essential issue is power; the extent to which the Salvadoran military has been able to exert its power over society has determined the level of militarization or demilitarization in the country.

Williams and Walter maintain that the militarization process in El Salvador predated the 1930s and was "rooted in the military's modernization and the growing stresses related to the agro-export model of development" (p. 9). After briefly describing the origins of El Salvador's militarization, the authors trace the extent and nature of this process following the coup of 1931 and the military's assumption of direct control of the national government. They contend that during the years of the Hernandez Martinez regime, the military developed into an independent political force. It is during these years that the military cemented its control of the countryside through the use of paramilitary structures such as the ***patrullas cantonales***, ***escoltas militares***, and the ***Guardia Civica*** (pp. 23-26).

In their discussion of the decades following the ouster of Hernandez Martinez, Williams and Walter argue that the coups of 1948 and 1960 resembled each other in that both began with "an initial commitment to electoral democracy followed by rules for political participation and government-sponsored parties that put the opposition at a disadvantage" (p. 68). In neither case, however, did the military remove itself from the political scene. During the 1950s, the military argued that national security depended upon economic and social development, which in turn depended upon the armed forces' ability to maintain peace and stability. During the 1960s, the military resorted to the argument that only it could protect the nation from the far left and far right extremists. In addition, civic action programs designed to foster improved civil-military relations increased the armed forces' presence in rural areas.

In the second half of the book, Williams and Walter set out to explain the armed forces' failure to implement further reforms and stave off an impending military crisis. In keeping with their historical-structural perspective, the authors point to El Salvador's dependence upon the agro-export model as the underlying reason for that failure. During the 1960s and 1970s, industrial development took a back seat to export diversification into products such as cotton, cattle, and sugar. [2] Agro-export diversification not only encroached upon lands that might otherwise have been used for agrarian reform programs, it also altered traditional rural labor relations, which in turn led to even more peasant discontent. Williams and Walter further contend that meaningful political reform would have hurt the military's "institutional autonomy, its control of the state, and its rural power base... (p. 87)." Thus, radicalization of the left, electoral corruption, and military repression all spiraled upwards during the 1970s and culminated in another coup by officers hoping to defuse the political situation in 1979, much the way the military had done previously in 1948 and 1960. Although scholars such as Baloyra have argued that the 1979 coup was a watershed event marking the beginning of the end of "reactionary despotism" and "authoritarian domination" in El Salvador,[3] Williams and Walter disagree. Even though the coup brought previously excluded actors into the political system and led to some limited agrarian reform, they maintain that the military's only goal was to prevent a revolution; at no point did the armed forces relinquish their control of the situation. In fact, the authors maintain that during the next decade El Salvadoran society grew even more militarized (pp.112-114).

Williams and Walter contend that El Salvador's transition away from authoritarian rule was not a transition toward democracy. Using Adam Przeworksi's work as a conceptual guide,[4] they focus on the military's ability to dictate the terms of the formal transfer of power to civilian authority. Thus, what took place during the 1980s was only an "uneven process of liberalization... (p. 115)." Democratization, "institutionalizing uncertainty" in the political process, did not truly begin until after the peace accords of 1992. In support of this argument, the authors point to a steady drop in voter turnout throughout the 1980s and the government's inability or unwillingness to hold

officers accountable for violent acts of repression. Liberalization, they argue, was merely a counterinsurgency tactic designed to weaken support for the FMLN (p. 115).

After outlining the peace process in El Salvador, Williams and Walter assess the possibilities for real demilitarization of Salvadoran society and politics following the signing of the 1992 accords. Although the peace accords offered the possibility of ending the military's prolonged history of political domination, the authors contend that the accords fell far short of demilitarizing El Salvador. The negotiation process did reduce many of the military's traditional prerogatives, but not the tutelary power it has over the political system. Nor did the accords completely dismantle the military's "paramilitary network of social controls" (p. 183). As such, the end conclusion is that for El Salvador to become truly demilitarized, "the impetus for change must come from within the military; if not, the Salvadoran armed forces risk becoming a total anachronism in the future" (p. 196).

In general, Williams and Walter put forth convincing arguments in their treatment of Salvadoran politics. The only troubling aspect of the book is the authors' negative treatment of the 1992 peace accords. By criticizing the accords for not going far enough toward creating the changes necessary to demilitarize El Salvador completely, Williams and Walter imply that the accords could in fact have been the solution to the problem of militarization. This contradicts their earlier argument that the underlying cause of El Salvador's militarization was its dependence upon the agro-export model of development. According to this line of reasoning, without altering El Salvador's economic organization, the only way the peace accords could have gone "far enough" would have been to completely eliminate the military as an institution.

Clearly, Williams' and Walter's sympathies do not lie with the armed forces. Nevertheless, by using a historical-structural perspective rather than simply conducting a behavioral analysis of the military's involvement in politics, they move beyond trying to determine whom to blame and delve into the deeper issues of how and why Salvadoran society and politics evolved the way it has. For this reason, Williams' and Walter's latest work is an excellent model for future studies of military engagement in politics and disengagement.

Scholars and students alike will find ***Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy*** to be an important addition to the literature on military involvement in Latin American politics. Williams and Walter have conducted careful research using a wide variety of primary sources to provide readers with new insights. Of particular interest are the many personal interviews with former and current high-ranking officers within the Salvadoran military. The authors' firm grasp of the discourse surrounding the Salvadoran armed forces, as well as their knowledge of the dominant theories governing military intervention in politics and disengagement, makes ***Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy*** an engaging synthesis of the existing literature on the topic and an ideal choice for graduate-level seminars. Undergraduates unfamiliar with Salvadoran politics may have difficulty following the text given that the authors presume the reader to have a basic understanding of certain key historical events. Nonetheless, the books various charts and tables make it useful as an instructional tool in any classroom.

NOTES:

[1]. See Michael Lowy and Eder Sader, "The Militarization of the State in Latin America," ***Latin American Perspectives*** 12, no. 4 (fall 1985), particularly page 9. Also, Felipe Aguero, "The Military and Limits to Democratization," in Mainwaring, O'Donnell, and Valenzuela, eds., ***Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American***

Democracies in Comparative Perspective (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992)

[2]. One of the best works on this topic is Robert G. Williams' *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.

[3]. Enrique Baloyra, *El Salvador en transicion*, San Salvador: UCA Editores, 1982. Also by the same author, "Reactionary Despotism in Central America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 15, no. 2 (1983):315.

[4]. Adam Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts," in Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad, eds., *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Citation: Douglas R. Keberlein-Gutierrez. Review of Williams, Philip J.; Walter, Knut. *Militarization and Demilitarization in El Salvador's Transition to Democracy.* H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2486