
Reviewed by Bridget Chesterton (Buffalo State University)

Published on H-Environment (October, 2021)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Outside of its large and violent international wars and notorious dictatorships, Paraguay has received little attention from English-language social scientists. This is not because other periods or moments lack noteworthy events but rather because those wars, specifically the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-70) and the Chaco War (1932-35), and those dictatorships, most recently the Stroessner regime (1954-89), have had an outsized influence on the history, economy, society, and culture of the Paraguayan past and present. Barbara A. Ganson's edited volume on the most recent events, culture, and politics of Paraguay is a welcome addition to the English-language literature on Paraguay. Mostly based on studies by anthropologists and political scientists, the collection of essays seeks to bring the nation's more recent past (since the end of the Stroessner era) into focus.

The book has a strong and engaging section on Paraguay's Indigenous people, including chapters by René D. Harder Horst, Richard K. Reed, and Paula Canova. These three chapters highlight Indigenous vulnerabilities while simultaneously demonstrating the strength of community activism to preserve Native identity. Together, these chapters offer profound insight into contemporary life in Paraguay. The volume then moves to a discussion on the modern political system in the country in a chapter coauthored by Sarah Patricia Cern Villagra, Sara Mabel Villalba Portillo, Eduardo Tamayo Belda, and Roque Merles Pintos, which provides an in-depth study of the development of the 1992 Paraguayan constitution. This chapter is probably the least engaging chapter in the collection as it does not offer much more than an outline of the authoritarian regime of Stroessner and the response to the dictatorship by the new constitution. This chapter is followed by a close study of the role of women in Paraguayan politics by Brian Turner. It offers an excellent analysis of how women have slowly gained access to political power but also outlines how that power is limited when compared to other Latin American nations. Finally, the volume ends with a study of Paraguay's role within Mercosur by Melissa H. Birch. This is the only chapter that looks beyond the boundaries of Paraguay to understand the nation's larger role in the region. The analysis concludes that while Mercosur has “provided many opportunities ... only some of them have been fully exploited” (p. 158.)

The most stimulating and engaging chapter is by anthropologist Reed. This chapter traces the journey of a Guaraní family out of the forest and
into the capital city of Asunción. It notes how modern agricultural practices have pushed Indigenous peoples from their land and brought about the devastation of the forest. Based on over thirty years of ethnographic research, it is a powerful reminder of how the lives of Indigenous peoples in Paraguay have changed dramatically because of environmental factors, the lack of political will to protect Native cultures, and modern economic systems. While the chapter attempts to land on a positive note, documenting the relative success of Guaraní women in Asunción overall, it leaves an indelible impression about the harsh realities of Indigenous peoples in Paraguay.

Canova’s chapter on the Ayoreo of the Chaco and their relationship to Mennonite settlers is also particularly noteworthy. Using labor to understand the connections between the Ayoreo and the Anabaptist communities, Canova weaves together a narrative that explores how the Ayoreo employed various techniques and survival strategies to obtain land in Filadelfia, the largest Mennonite community in the Chaco.

While noting in the introduction that the theme of the collection is “how ... Paraguayan society fared since the overthrow of the Stroessner dictatorship,” the book could have benefited from a more directed overarching theme, with gender and women’s history being the most obvious choice (p. 1). Ganson spends a great deal of time in the introductory chapter focused on women in Paraguayan history and many of the chapters are directed toward gender and women’s studies. This lack of thematic cohesion among the various chapters is unfortunate as it makes the essays disjointed. Also, the book could have benefited from the insight of other social scientists who could have helped to explain the growing power of Paraguay’s large soy and agro-businesses and resistance to such unbounded agricultural growth. In the end, however, the collection is a useful guide to understanding the basic outlines of Paraguay today. The book is most useful if read alongside the works of other Paraguayanists, including Kregg Hetherington’s The Government of Beas: Regulating Life in the Age of Monocrops (2020), on Fernando Lugo’s government, and Christine Fölch’s Hydropolitics: The Itaipu Dam, Sovereignty, and the Engineering of Modern South America (2019), on the Itaipú dam.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56911

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.