

---

No. 96 (2014) April, pp. 117-126  
[www.erlacs.org](http://www.erlacs.org)

## Assessing the ‘Arrival of Democracy’ in Central America

*Review Essay by Kees Biekart*

- *Central America in the New Millennium: Living Transition and Reimagining Democracy*, edited by Jennifer L. Burrell and Ellen Moodie. CEDLA Latin America Studies (CLAS) Vol. 102. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013.
- *The Politics of Modern Central America: Civil War, Democratization, and Underdevelopment*, by Fabrice Lehoucq. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- *Handbook of Central American Governance*, edited by Diego Sánchez-Ancochea and Salvador Martí i Puig. Milton Park and New York: Routledge, 2014.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Central America was associated with military governments, revolutionary movements, civil war, extreme inequality, and authoritarianism in the ‘backyard’ of the United States. Broad social mobilizations and political repression led to guerrilla uprisings in three countries simultaneously, putting the region around 1980 in a profound crisis with global dimensions. The excessive U.S. reaction led by President Ronald Reagan, his spokespersons Elliot Abrams (Undersecretary of State) and Jean Kirkpatrick (UN Ambassador), and implemented in the region by a range of Cold War veterans reinventing the Monroe Doctrine, suggested something special was happening there. Burrell and Moodie (2013, 15) summarize it as ‘a fanatic resolve to overcome the humiliation of Vietnam’.

Now twenty-five years later, long after the end of the Cold War, Central America has acquired a rather different image. If it is at all known to outsiders, Central America is notorious as one of the ‘world’s most dangerous places’, with countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras experi-

encing high crime rates due to drug trafficking and competing youth gangs. One could easily overlook the fact that the countries of this region have also witnessed ‘the arrival of democracy’, as Edelberto Torres Rivas calls it. These new democracies came into being through an authoritarian route and are characterized by a violent and conflictive political culture. Despite occasional backlashes such as the 2009 coup in Honduras, it cannot be denied that a democratic culture has taken root throughout Central America, which, far from perfect, suggests the arrival of a certain amount of political stability.

Indeed, it has been quite a ‘journey’, as the region has experienced some drastic transformations. If we examine its demography, for example, we see that the region has doubled in population from 20.4 million in 1980 to an estimated 41 million inhabitants in 2013. Most of these people have moved to ever-expanding urban areas, thus bringing an end to predominantly agrarian societies. Some positive developments can also be identified: remittances by emigrants have increased greatly, the average GDP has doubled, and a new middle class has emerged, illustrating a tendency towards more diverse societies (even though inequality remains stunning). Overall, Central Americans have become better educated in this period, which is underscored by increasing rates of literacy. But the perverse influence of drug trafficking concomitant with rising crime rates and a culture of terror generating more casualties and fear than the civil wars of the 1980s ever did triggers the question: are Central Americans actually better off with the arrival of democracy?

The three volumes reviewed here on social and political developments in Central America since the end of the civil wars are written by a new generation of researchers from Central America, Europe and North America. Their analyses to find structural explanations for the origins of the Central American crisis build further upon the classical studies of well-known intellectual predecessors such as Walter LaFeber (1983), Víctor Bulmer-Thomas (1987), James Dunkerley (1988), and Héctor Pérez-Brignoli (1989), and are based on research produced in the first decade of the new millennium. Using approaches very different in style and scope, their analyses attempt to characterize the new political reality in Central America.

### **A political economy approach**

One way to approach the political transformations in Central America is to take a comparative political economy approach. This is what Fabrice Lehoucq does in *The Politics of Modern Central America* in which he explicitly elaborates on the Booth, Wade, and Walker (2010) volume *Under-*

*standing Central America*, a classical text for North American scholars reprinted five times since the late 1980s. Lehoucq essentially tries to understand how inequality triggers political protest, and eventually civil war. He focuses on Central America, but he also wants to make more general claims about the relationship between economic development and democratization so that it can possibly be applied to other regions. He explores three different debates in relation to this issue. The first is on the origins of civil war and revolution, which tries to explain why in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador authoritarian governments in the 1970s generated popular uprising and guerrilla warfare, whereas Costa Rica (and to a certain extent Panama and Honduras) were exempted from civil war. This is an important question on which academics have never reached a consensus. Lehoucq largely explains this difference by pointing at the rapid capital accumulation following WWII which was based on existing export crops such as banana and coffee, and the new export products of cotton, cattle and sugar. Their revenues eventually were unequally distributed due to an unequal land distribution structure, giving rise to land-based oligarchies. However, this did not explain the emergence of authoritarian (and often military) regimes, which Lehoucq attributes to the lack of competitive party politics in most countries. At this point Lehoucq's (otherwise careful) analysis too quickly stumbles over particular local circumstances in his ambition to discover broader general patterns. The role of the reformist periods of the 1940s in Costa Rica and Guatemala (as Dunkerley and Pérez-Brignoli explained) definitely worked out very differently in each country, and hence would have required a more nuanced treatment of the political implications a few decades later. It is probably too simple to blame the lack of democratic openings in the late 1970s on a culture of 'reactionary despotism', which, as Lehoucq argues, 'was stubbornly resistant to change because oligarchs could easily defend their privileges' (Lehoucq 2012, 28).

In the second part of his book, Lehoucq elaborates on the assumption that democratization is preceded by economic development. Exploring why in the early 1990s negotiations and peace treaties gave rise to a process of democratic transition in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, Lehoucq tries to find causal relationships between macro-economic development statistics and key moments in this political transition process. This is not an easy undertaking, as economic growth rates went down throughout the region in the 1990s. It was a period in which most civil wars were ended through dialogue, largely due to the end of the Cold War and the inability of any of the parties to crush the opponent. Moreover, the two countries that were outside the direct zone of conflict (Panama and Costa Rica) had

much higher growth rates and certainly less funds from international aid agencies. Lehoucq maintains that it was the debt crisis and the lack of foreign direct investment which undermined economic prosperity in the wake of the peace agreements. But he has difficulties explaining this because all of these governments followed the principles of the Washington Consensus. In fact, low returns on investment were probably also due to the massive exodus of (skilled) workers to neighbouring countries and especially to the United States, generating impressive flows of remittances which, by the late 1990s, were equal to half of the total value of exports in El Salvador and about a third of exports in Nicaragua and Guatemala.

In the final part of his analysis, Lehoucq points out that most Central American countries in the new millennium failed to implement proper electoral reforms (such as independent electoral tribunals) and what he calls ‘systems of electoral governance’. This has generated ‘low-quality democracies’ in which the new regimes basically ignore citizens’ demands for more welfare redistribution. Lehoucq tends to blame the Central American elites (and not in the last place their representatives in the presidential offices such as Aleman, Ortega, Zelaya, and Serrano) for not playing the democratic game properly. He writes, ‘It is hard to avoid the conclusion that presidentialism has aggravated political conflict’ (Lehoucq 2012, 150), and adds the generalization that ‘systems with executives elected independently of the legislature break down more often than parliamentary or semi-presidential systems’. However, this sounds like a rather minimalist understanding of democracy as being fundamentally a process of organizing fair elections. Karl and Schmitter (1993, 42), also in relation to the newly democratizing Central American states, called it the ‘fallacy of electoralism’: ‘the tendency to focus on the holding of elections, while ignoring other political realities’. The bottom line of Lehoucq’s argument seems to be that limited democracies maintain high levels of inequality, which in turn generate unrest, violence, and immigration.

The problem with Lehoucq’s electoralist explanation is that it is too generalist and does not sufficiently account for specific contextual exceptions. It is too easy to showcase Panama and Costa Rica as examples of higher quality and ‘most functional’ democracies where inequalities have been reduced. Social unrest has also mounted in these countries, and human rights abuses suggest that the notion of ‘authoritarian democracies’ coined by Leftwich (1996) deserves a closer analysis for these countries. Overall, Lehoucq’s comparative political economy approach tends to irritate after a while as it is often superficial, decontextualized, and does not satisfactorily address the central questions.

## Narratives of democratic realities

*Central America in the New Millennium*, a volume edited by Jennifer Burrell and Ellen Moodie, examines social and political developments in the region after the civil wars ended and the peace accords had been signed. The editors wonder what 'democracy' actually means to Central America's citizens in the midst of neoliberal restructuring. They notice that a new type of 'free-market democracy' was introduced in the post-Cold War era with considerable foreign support, but the eventual benefits for Central Americans in their daily survival is contested. For example, the level of violence has not been reduced, but has actually increased in the post-conflict period as a result of gang violence, human rights violations, and political violence. The relevant question asked here is whether Central Americans are better off in the new period of democracy. The contributors clearly choose to take a perspective on politics from the vantage point of everyday struggles of ordinary citizens, rather than from the perspective of the elites, making the book original and compelling.

The volume is the product of discussions amongst a group of ethnographic (largely North American) scholars concerned that Central America has vanished from the geopolitical map. After two decades in which the region was central to U.S. foreign policy, the end of the Cold War has also meant that, as the editors call it, 'Central America has largely been erased from global imagination' (Burrell and Moodie 2013, 8). The purpose of the book is essentially to 'reimagine democracy' by examining 'the regional circumstances and daily lives within the frames of democratization and neoliberalism, as they shape lived experiences of transition' (Burrell and Moodie 2013, 9). Four interrelated themes give a basic structure to the volume: democracy, security, multiculturalism, and neoliberalism. Each theme is treated in three or four chapters highlighting a range of topical issues: *campesino* activisms, corrupt party systems, indigenous rights, structural racism (in Guatemala), migration, and new developments in, for example, regional tourism.

The essays on democracy start with a lively account by Rosario Montoya of how the key rural supporters of the Sandinista revolution view the profound transformation from a class-based militancy to a neoliberal and 'post-insurgent individuality'. Despite the disillusionment of an eroded revolutionary project led by a corrupt leadership, also at the local level, she traces how some *campesino* leaders in Nicaragua have remained committed to the principles of social justice and solidarity. However, many others were caught up by the neoliberal principles of the 'survival of the fittest' that led to increased competition and political fragmentation added to the

old Nicaraguan political traditions such as *caciquismo* and the exclusion of women in key positions. The important question is, as Montoya clearly sees, whether *Sandinismo* had at all managed to supersede these Nicaraguan traditions. The chapter by Boyer and Peñalva on the Honduran peasant organizations lacks this subtle political analysis, which is a pity as the Honduran political crisis under Zelaya was also influenced by their Sandinista neighbours. A chapter on Costa Rica discusses the 2007 campaign against the free-trade agreement with the U.S. (CAFTA), highlighting the role of the middle-class based ‘patriotic committees’.

In her chapter on post-war El Salvador, Moodie wonders what happens to desires of democracy when violence and corruption continue in peacetime. She describes the reaction we have seen in many instances over the past few decades, when expectations for fundamental and transformative social change quickly erode during transition periods, leading to broadly felt disillusion. Moodie calls it ‘disenchantment’. She saw Salvadorans falling back into the same distrust of politics as before the peace agreements, but with one major difference. The hope for a different future which had been underlying this ‘desire for democracy’ had definitely been undermined. She unpacks the reaction of disappointed Salvadorans by analysing their comments on a variety of crime stories. Some had hoped for a more adequate role of the police and the judicial system in the new democratic era, whilst others were disappointed in the solidarity of their community members or in the lack of better living conditions in general. The first elected FMLN-president Mauricio Funes also could not change this pattern, even though he was the bearer of hope for a new type of democratic politics. However, within two years after Funes took office in 2009, crime statistics were rising again, and impunity measures continued as before. People took to the streets in broad coalitions and shouted ‘*la llaman democracia y no lo es*’ (‘they call it democracy and it’s not’).

Strangely enough, Guatemala is not discussed in the book as part of the examination of ‘reimagining democracy’, even though this would have deserved a more in-depth analysis than just referring to indigeneity, human rights, racism, and migration. After all, Guatemala was the country that had experienced a ‘democratic spring’ in the years 1944-54 with Arévalo and Arbenz. The editors also dedicate quite some attention to the emerging role of tourism, whereas more urgent themes such as religion are missing. Having said that, the ethnographic approach is refreshing and adds colour to the analyses.

## The paradox of authoritarian institutions

The new *Handbook on Central American Governance* edited by Salvador Martí i Puig and Diego Sánchez-Ancochea is the most ambitious of the three volumes discussed here. It aims to look at the impact of the 'triple transition' in Central America: from war to peace, from dictatorship to democracy, and from state-led to market-led development. The editors wonder whether the power balances within the region have really changed and whether gains have been greater than the obvious losses. The starting point of their analysis is the aftermath of the three peace agreements that were signed at the end of the last century in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. This pacification process provided the conditions for a shift from authoritarian to democratic rule, albeit under neoliberal economic policies. In a broad sense, they consider these as simultaneous processes of democratization and globalization, which have institutionally changed these societies in different and often contradictory ways. The *Handbook* analyses these triple transitions by examining their international financial, economic, and political dimensions.

The twenty-six chapters in this extensive volume have been written by scholars from the region as well as by outsiders, including 'veterans' such as John Booth and Mitchell Seligson. In fact, their chapter on the legitimacy of newly democratic institutions is quite revealing. It shows that political parties, courts, and legislatures still lack credibility in the eyes of the Central Americans. Opinion polls suggest that citizens have more confidence in the Catholic Church and the armed forces, which paradoxically are still the most authoritarian institutions in the region. This may not be surprising in countries like Nicaragua and Honduras, where high courts lack political independence, as shown by Martínez Barahona. She gives the example of the Honduran Supreme Court, which consisted of lawyers close to the military and close to officials accused of corruption. After the Court was overhauled it faced its main test in 2009 after the *autogolpe* of President Mel Zelaya and the reaction of the armed forces. Rather than prosecuting and eventually removing him, the Supreme Court decided to validate the illegal actions by the armed forces and the Congress against Zelaya, thereby demonstrating again its political alliance with the dominant political forces in Honduras. However, Martínez also acknowledges that judiciaries have acquired new powers and autonomy as a result of judicial reforms: high courts are increasingly beginning to play a central role in controlling and overseeing governmental actions.

A key element in this whole process of democratization is of course the changing role of the armed forces. For decades they had exercised power

directly or indirectly through authoritarian regimes, and always considered themselves to be an inevitable political actor. Military reforms came in steps following the peace agreements. After a process of demilitarization of the state and the creation of national civilian police forces (El Salvador and Guatemala), defence budgets as well as military personnel were reduced. In Nicaragua, this occurred quite dramatically from over 86,000 troops in 1990 to around 14,000 in 1996. But the armed forces are still very influential; in Guatemala and El Salvador the Ministers of Defence are still military generals, thus illustrating the way in which their military autonomy is guaranteed. Moreover, the increased level of criminal violence has given new legitimacy to the armed forces as the national police forces are often unable to maintain internal security. Pérez and Martínez therefore conclude in their chapter on civil-military relationships that, ‘while legislatures are more powerful than they were in the past, they still lack significant or adequate authority over defence policy and are unable to supervise the military’ (Sánchez-Ancochea and Martí i Puig 2014, 193).

The *Handbook* editors correctly point out that the Central American process of democratization (with the exception of Costa Rica) was fundamentally different from the ‘redemocratization’ process in South America in the 1980s. The process in Central America was far more complex due to reactionary political regimes (El Salvador and Guatemala), next to authoritarian (Honduras) and revolutionary (Nicaragua) regimes. Whilst in South America regime transition was negotiated between authoritarian regimes and opposition parties, the Central American transitions took place after a civil war with strong international pressure and generally with a minor role of political parties. The fact that military stalemates and international pressure provided breakthroughs also indicates that neither opposition parties nor ruling elites were happy with the eventual result. This is an important observation, as it also explains why this elite negotiation did not lead to structural reforms; after all the newly created democratic elites did not basically transform existing power relations or change levels of inequality. The newly emerging business groups warned their governments not to stretch social redistribution policies too far as it would lead to capital flight and a reduction of foreign investment. The authors of the *Handbook* tend to argue that a process of (neoliberal) elite diversification took place throughout the region, resulting eventually in more moderate social reforms and a stronger influence on electoral campaigns (supporting the new right). The conclusion is therefore that state reforms have been largely frustrated and that Central American states remain weak and fragile with a narrow fiscal



base and with a bureaucracy that still lacks autonomy from political parties and economic interest groups.

### Assessing the quality of democracy

I was curious to see whether any of the books under review would qualify as an updated successor to the traditional standard works on Central America by Dunkerley (1988) or Pérez-Brignoli (1989). The three volumes are partly overlapping, and in several respects also complementary. I found the broad and often sweeping generalizations by Lehoucq the least useful as a tool to understanding the latest political developments in the region. Lehoucq also wrote a chapter in the *Handbook* that is certainly more focused than his book. The added value of the edited volume by Burrell and Moodie is its quality of carefully presented narratives on everyday politics, as these are missing in the other volumes. The downside of the Burrell and Moodie volume is the lack of synthesis and analytical conclusions: many chapters suddenly end as if pages were lost. I also found the choice of themes often incomplete and insufficiently elaborated. The *Handbook*, in comparison, is a carefully edited and fairly complete volume which impressed me overall. An annotated bibliography would have been useful on key themes treated in the book. Next to a range of thematic chapters, the *Handbook* also offers chapters on country backgrounds, including useful empirical data and statistics. It is what one can expect from a *Handbook*, even though (surprisingly enough) it does not sufficiently explain what is meant by 'governance' in the current Central American context.

Two final questions remain: how do these three volumes help us to assess the new political reality of Central America?; and, are Central Americans really better off with the arrival of democracy? Whether looking from a perspective of 'incomplete consolidation' (Lehoucq), 'reimagining democracy' (Burrell and Moodie) or 'social democratization' (Sánchez-Ancochea and Martí i Puig), all authors agree that democratic conditions have improved over the past decades and that Central Americans are better off now than they were twenty-five years ago. The reform of key democratic institutions (judiciary, legislature, executive, as well as electoral systems) is still a work in progress and often evolves slower than what would have been desired. Elites remain dominant and citizens' participation is still severely limited by cultural and economic inequalities. After all, over forty per cent of the population continues to live in poverty. But since the 1990s every country has experienced at least five rounds of clean elections without major fraud. The resulting political systems remain fragile and (in the case of Guatemala and Honduras) go from crisis to crisis. But what can you

expect, because according to Torres Rivas, ‘we must recognize that democracy arrived in the region despite the absence of democratic actors as such’ (Sánchez-Ancochea and Martí i Puig 2014, 3). So more breathing space is required for the newly emerging democratic actors (such as the ‘patriotic committees’ in Costa Rica, the LGBT groups in Honduras, or the *indígena* organizations in Guatemala) to flourish in their ‘journey’. Would this be a good topic for the next assessment in twenty-five years?

\* \* \*

**Kees Biekart** <biekart@iss.nl> is Associate Professor of Political Sociology at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of the Erasmus University (the Netherlands).

## References

- Booth, J. A.; Wade, C. J.; Walker, T. W. (2010) *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change* (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Bulmer-Thomas, V. (1987) *The Political Economy of Central America since 1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dunkerley, J. (1988) *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Central America*. London and New York: Verso.
- Karl, T. L. and Schmitter, C. (1993) ‘What democracy is ... and is not’. In: Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner (eds) *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 39-52.
- LaFeber, W. (1983) *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. New York: Norton.
- Leftwich, A. (ed.) (1996) *Democracy and Development*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pérez-Brignoli, H. (1989) *A Brief History of Central America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.