
REVIEW ESSAYS

UNDERSTANDING CENTRAL AMERICAN POLITICS *

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DEMOCRACY IN COSTA RICA. By CHARLES D. AMERINGER. (New York: Praeger, 1982. Pp. 138. \$19.95.)

POLITICS IN CENTRAL AMERICA: GUATEMALA, EL SALVADOR, HONDURAS, AND NICARAGUA. By THOMAS P. ANDERSON. (New York: Praeger, 1982. Pp. 221. \$23.95.)

THE WAR OF THE DISPOSSESSED: HONDURAS AND EL SALVADOR, 1969. By THOMAS P. ANDERSON. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. 203. \$16.50.)

EL SALVADOR: THE FACE OF REVOLUTION. By ROBERT ARMSTRONG and JANET SHENK. (Boston: South End Press, 1982. Pp. 284. \$7.50.)

EL SALVADOR IN TRANSITION. By ENRIQUE BALOYRA. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982. Pp. 236. Cloth \$19.95, paper \$8.95.)

DOLLARS AND DICTATORS: A GUIDE TO CENTRAL AMERICA. By TOM BARRY, BETH WOOD, and DEB PREUSCH. (Albuquerque, N.M.: The Resource Center, 1982. Pp. 263. \$5.95.)

BANANAS, LABOR, AND POLITICS IN HONDURAS: 1954-1963. By ROBERT MACCAMERON. (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1983. Pp. 180. \$10.00.)

*The author would like to thank Mark Rosenberg of Florida International University and William LeoGrande of American University for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

REVOLUTION IN EL SALVADOR: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION. By TOMMIE SUE MONTGOMERY. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982. Pp. 252. Cloth \$22.50, paper \$10.95.)

REVOLUTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA. Edited by the STANFORD CENTRAL AMERICAN ACTION NETWORK. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983. Pp. 508. Cloth \$30.00, paper \$13.95.)

Since the late 1970s, civil war and revolution in Central America as well as growing controversy over the involvement of the United States in the area have stimulated an intense new interest in the internal politics of Central American countries. Although few analysts were concerned with Central America a short while ago, an insatiable demand now exists among scholars, journalists, government officials, and the general public for information about this long-ignored region of Latin America.

Many of those who recently have become intrigued with Central America have found it difficult initially to learn about the region because relatively little had been written about Central American politics (especially in English) in the years before the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1977–79.¹ The existing literature was uneven in quality and marred by major gaps in basic information. This unfortunate situation largely resulted from the simple fact that, with the exception of the small Central American academic community and a still smaller core of North American analysts, few scholars had devoted their careers to studying these countries.

Since 1979, however, the vast market for information on Central America has generated an avalanche of new books on Central American politics and political history. Some of these works have been written by scholars with lengthy experience in the area, while others have been produced by a new group of predominantly North American researchers only recently drawn to Central America by its rising international significance. This essay will first comment on the contribution of this body of new literature to our understanding of Central American politics then examine nine representative examples of the present “boom” in publications in English about Central America.²

The new literature on Central America, as illustrated by the works to be discussed in this review, provides a wealth of essential information regarding the political actors, issues, and institutions of the region. Most of the studies not only describe the political developments of the turbulent 1970s and 1980s but also reanalyze prior social and political history from the vantage point of the contemporary context, often filling gaps in earlier accounts in the process.³ Admittedly, some of these books appear to have been rushed into print and hence contain a number of factual errors, but the majority of the new studies are competent analyses and a few are remarkably well written and rich in detail.

At this early stage in the development of the literature on Central American politics, it may be unrealistic to expect much more than basic descriptive information to be supplied. Nevertheless, if the Central American literature is compared with the larger body of works on Latin American politics or on comparative politics in general, significant shortcomings are evident. First of all, most of the new literature on Central America is surprisingly noncomparative. The majority of works published over the last several years focus on a single country, rarely comparing its development or its political characteristics with those of its neighbors. This trend is unfortunate because nations are always better understood when seen in comparative perspective, as Alfred Stepan's study of Peru clearly demonstrates.⁴ Furthermore, Central America offers a rich potential for such comparisons, as is suggested by the many comparative observations found in the regional histories by Edelberto Torres Rivas, Ralph Woodward, and Ciro F. S. Cardoso and Hector Pérez Brignoli.⁵ The current political stalemate in El Salvador, for instance, would be much better understood if the development of the Salvadorean revolutionary coalition were to be compared and contrasted in detail with the case of revolutionary Nicaragua; yet, most current works on El Salvador fail to pursue this obvious line of inquiry. Moreover, few seem to speculate at length about how the Central American political experience resembles or diverges from the experiences of other parts of Latin America or other regions of the world. Although countless newspaper editorials compare the Salvadorean and Vietnamese revolutionary conflicts, no genuine comparative analysis of these two cases has been undertaken in the scholarly literature.

An additional weakness of the literature on Central America is the almost completely atheoretical character of most analyses. Although a considerable body of theoretical literature on comparative revolution and political instability exists, few scholars studying Central America either draw upon that literature for insights or attempt to contribute to its development. Much of the analysis of Central American politics thus seems to take place in a theoretical vacuum. Highly relevant established works on political change and revolution are ignored or mentioned only in passing; and major recent contributions to these fields, such as the provocative neo-Marxist analysis of Theda Skocpol, are never cited.⁶

Few students of Central America have begun to reflect seriously on the significance that their findings might have for the analysis of political development in other parts of the world. Do Central American patterns confirm or contradict previous theoretical assumptions? Which of the many competing general theories of revolution seems most persuasive on the basis of the Central American cases? In time scholars should begin to make greater use of the theoretical literature and to address important theoretical issues in their work. As they do so, more

comparative analysis should follow naturally because such analysis is indispensable for the progress of general theory. One desirable outcome of this process should be a general theory of political change in Central America, one such as Guillermo O'Donnell, David Collier, and others have constructed for the most industrialized Latin American nations with the bureaucratic-authoritarian model.⁷

In short, most of the new literature on Central American politics supplies a great deal of useful information, but it often does so from an unnecessarily narrow, noncomparative, and atheoretical perspective. The balance of this essay will discuss nine works in light of these preliminary general comments. The first four books considered present material on more than one nation in the area, while the last five are studies of single countries.

Historian Thomas Anderson, a longtime student of Salvadorean history and politics, published *Matanza*,⁸ an excellent study of the 1932 peasant uprising in that country. His recent book entitled *Politics in Central America*, a collection of separate case studies on Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, is the only general volume of its kind available (as of mid-1983) for undergraduates and others unfamiliar with Central American politics. Unfortunately, the book omits Costa Rica as a nonviolent, democratic exception to standard Central American political patterns. Each case study consists of three chapters: the first two trace the country's political and social history until mid-1981, while the third examines underlying political, social, and economic forces and outlines U.S. policy options. Although little attempt is made to engage in extensive comparative analysis using consistent conceptual or theoretical frameworks, some comparisons among the Central American countries do surface when Anderson weighs the factors working for and against political stability in each of the countries. For example, he notes that a key factor behind the Sandinistas' success was the extraordinary military weakness of Somoza's small National Guard, while the greater size of the Salvadorean armed forces poses a much more formidable obstacle to revolution. Throughout the book, Anderson generally maintains a sense of balance and objectivity as is demonstrated in his much-too-short discussions of alternative U.S. policy choices. Experts on the area will find nothing new here, of course, and will quibble with the unavoidable lack of depth on individual countries and the overreliance on English-language sources. They will also be troubled by a number of factual inaccuracies, such as Anderson's overestimation of Somoza's control of agricultural production in prerevolutionary Nicaragua or his lack of appreciation for the political significance of the large ejidal land-tenure sector (almost one-third of landholdings) of rural Honduras. On the other hand, undergraduates may be confused by the mass of minor

names and details included in each of the country analyses. But at least until a competing case-study collection exists (one that should include a chapter on Costa Rica), Anderson's volume will find a large audience.

The second Anderson book considered in this review is one of the all-too-few studies of interrelationships among Central American nations. In *The War of the Dispossessed*, the author analyzes the 1969 conflict between El Salvador and Honduras and speculates on its causes and its long-term effects. The histories of the two nations are summarized, and the details of the four-day confrontation are described clearly. The book, which is intended for specialists, represents a useful addition to the literature on the war and includes capable previous studies by William Durham and coauthors Marco Virgilio Carías and Daniel Slutzky.⁹ Anderson's main contribution is a more complex view of the war's origins. Durham and others trace the conflict's cause to land scarcities in both nations that led the Honduran government to evict more than one hundred thousand Salvadorean peasant immigrants and forced the Salvadorean government to resist their return. Anderson agrees with this thesis up to a point, but he argues that Salvadorean President Sánchez Hernández's aggressive personality and his fears of being overthrown if he vacillated were also major factors behind El Salvador's actions in the crisis. Disagreeing with Durham, Anderson views the traditional hostility between Hondurans and Salvadoreans as a serious causal factor. Throughout the book Anderson strives to be evenhanded, and except for his harsh treatment of Honduran General López Arellano, he generally succeeds.

Some readers may dislike the muckraking tone of *Dollars and Dictators* by Tom Barry, Beth Wood, and Deb Preusch, but they nonetheless may discover something of interest in the book's first six chapters. These chapters detail the economic relationship between Central America and the United States and describe its effects on regional politics from a radical perspective. In the process, the authors furnish a substantial amount of data on trade, finance, and aid patterns. But their apparent belief that the U.S. has a major economic stake in Central America that is significantly influencing its regional policies is not very convincing. Although the book demonstrates that the activities of North American corporations in the area have enormous impact on the lives of Central Americans, the authors neglect to mention that these activities generally are of minor importance to these corporations in the larger context of their global operations. Except for a handful of companies such as United Brands, few U.S. enterprises depend on Central America for more than a small share of their total profits. The region may be very important to the United States geopolitically and symbolically, but it is of marginal value economically. The remaining chapters of the book furnish impressionis-

tic capsule discussions of each country that are unequal in depth and inconsistent in pattern. The authors rarely compare one case with another.

Revolution in Central America is a collection of previously published articles on Central America by North American and Latin American scholars that is organized topically, with introductory material written by members of the Stanford Central American Action Network. The Stanford Network authors are candid about their support for the revolutionary movements of the region and draw heavily from radical sources such as *Latin American Perspectives* and *Contemporary Marxism* for their selections. Besides containing much basic information in its five hundred pages, this volume also demonstrates the diversity of left-of-center views on the region. For instance, in their analysis of U.S. interests in Central America, Robert Girling and Luin Goldring explicitly reject simple arguments based on corporate economic interests and provide a more complex explanation for U.S. behavior. The Stanford Network also chose many other good analyses in this volume, such as Norma Chinchilla's discussion of the role of women in Central America, William Leo-Grande's articles on Nicaragua and El Salvador, and Amnesty International's powerful indictment of Guatemala's human-rights record.

Regrettably, not all of the selections in the book meet such high standards. The weaker contributions, which comprise about a fifth of the book, could simply be deleted in the next edition. Moreover, this book about revolution contains surprisingly few references to the broad literature on comparative revolution and even fewer attempts to analyze events in Central American countries from a comparative perspective. One reason that Steven Volk's excellent article on Honduras stands out from the others in the volume is because of its rare and effective use of comparisons with other nations. Finally, although ideological balance is not a requisite for a useful collection, the book would have been more stimulating had at least a few alternative views been included—if only as targets for radical critiques. Too many of the authors debate with straw men instead of important moderate or conservative opponents like Jeane Kirkpatrick.

Historian Charles Ameringer, biographer of José Figueres, Costa Rica's most important postwar politician,¹⁰ offers in *Democracy in Costa Rica* a brief, but instructive, study of the region's most stable nation. Drawing on the research of Samuel Stone, Mitchell Seligson, and many others,¹¹ Ameringer describes Costa Rican political institutions and political history for readers unacquainted with the country. Although the author manifests little interest in general theory, he compares the Costa Rican case frequently with more common Latin American political development patterns and considers several possible explanations for Costa Rica's uniqueness, one being early labor scarcity. Ameringer's chapter

entitled "The Problems of Tico Democracy" is especially useful because it balances the dangers inherent in Costa Rica's current economic decay and political difficulties against the strengths of the nation's traditionally legitimate political institutions, ultimately managing to retain some optimism about Costa Rica's future. The book lacks details about the Costa Rican economy and matters of public finance, and its bibliography neglects some significant works,¹² but Ameringer's study is nonetheless worth recommending to nonspecialists.

One of the best recent studies on Central America is Robert MacCameron's *Bananas, Labor, and Politics in Honduras*, an updated version of the author's doctoral dissertation. MacCameron offers a vivid description of the pivotal 1954–63 period in Honduran politics that began with the banana workers' strikes against both United Fruit and Standard Fruit. His analysis of the actions of the strikers, the companies, the Honduran army, and Honduran and U.S. government officials involved in the 1954 crisis will be useful to specialists for many years to come. Indeed, anyone wishing to understand contemporary Honduran politics will profit from reading this book. In his concluding assessment of this critical decade's impact on the Honduran labor movement, MacCameron correctly stresses the limits of labor's apparent achievements. The only real defect of the book is its dated bibliography, which omits several relevant works that have appeared in the last few years by such Honduran scholars as Mario Posas and Victor Meza.¹³

The new literature on Central America encompasses a sizable number of political analyses of El Salvador, including the three studies by Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, Tommie Sue Montgomery, and Enrique Baloyra.¹⁴ While all three books are well-written and highly informative examinations of Salvadorean history and politics, they differ considerably. *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* by Armstrong and Shenk is written in a popular journalistic style. It is especially effective in describing the impact of current conditions in El Salvador on the lives of ordinary people. Although the volume will not be useful to specialists, others will find this study a compelling introduction, whether or not they agree with the authors' support for the guerrillas.

Tommie Sue Montgomery's study, *Revolution in El Salvador*, is directed toward a more academic audience. Drawing on extensive personal interviews as well as prior research, the author outlines the historical and socioeconomic roots of the nation's political conflict as well as its current status. Her best chapter deals with the role of the Salvadorean church and offers a fine discussion of the political consequences of the expansion of the Christian Base Communities. Throughout her account, Montgomery proclaims her support for the Salvadorean guerrilla forces and boldly predicts their triumph by 1987, an assessment that many scholars will regard as overly optimistic. While events of the next few years will

resolve this particular dispute, Montgomery's argument would become much more convincing in the meantime if she would deepen her analysis of the political obstacles to the left's success. Her planned revised edition should more fully describe the political coalition that opposes the guerrillas and should take into consideration competing interpretations of the 1982 election results and recent analyses of changes within the Salvadorean military.

Political scientist Enrique Baloyra, best known for his studies of Venezuelan politics,¹⁵ has constructed an elaborate account of El Salvador's past and present political dynamics in *El Salvador in Transition*. His analysis rests on a careful examination of available sources, particularly those produced by the Salvadorean academic community. Baloyra makes a conscious effort to place the Salvadorean experience within a broader framework by comparing it with the experiences of other Latin American countries. An important section of the book outlines similarities and differences with the Mexican case to elucidate the unsuccessful efforts by members of the Salvadorean military to imitate the authoritarian reform model of Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional during the 1960s. On several occasions, Baloyra also attempts to relate the Salvadorean case to current theoretical literature. For example, he compares Salvadorean regimes to bureaucratic-authoritarian and national-security state models. Although he is highly critical of the Salvadorean oligarchy, the armed forces, and the policies of the Carter and Reagan administrations and is skeptical about the guerrillas, Baloyra provides a generally objective account. He would like to discover some formula that would reestablish the political center in El Salvador by drawing together moderates out of both of the armed camps. He recognizes the barriers to such an outcome, although he seems to underestimate them, and fears that the Salvadorean government will drift still further to the right.

Clearly, an intense new interest in Central America has developed, and most of the books considered here are helping meet the growing demand for information about the region's political systems. In the process, major gaps in the small, preexisting literature on Central America have been filled. Unfortunately, however, few of these informative studies have gone beyond providing basic data to engage in genuine comparative analysis or to draw linkages between Central American developments and the broad theoretical literature on political instability and comparative revolution. Enrique Baloyra's analysis of El Salvador is a welcome exception to this pattern. One hopes that future works on Central America will follow Baloyra's useful example in going beyond analyzing a single Central American country to carefully place its politics within broader comparative and theoretical contexts.¹⁶ Such studies would not only deepen understanding of Central America politics but would enable observations about the political experiences of Central

America to contribute to the ongoing development and refinement of general theories of political change.

NOTES

1. An excellent guide to the literature on Central American history and politics available before 1976 is found in Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., *Central America: A Nation Divided* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 278–321.
2. None of the books selected for review here is a case study of Nicaragua. The many new works on Nicaragua will be discussed in a separate LARR review essay. One analysis of Nicaragua that exhibits many of the strengths but few of the weaknesses of the works discussed here is John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982). A valuable earlier study is Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977).
3. Several large gaps in the Central American literature remain to be filled. For example, no thorough English-language analysis of Honduras has been made since William S. Stokes, *Honduras: A Case Study in Government* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1950). At least two forthcoming books will attempt to close this gap: James A. Morris, *Honduras: Caudillo Politics and Praetorian Rulers* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press) and *Honduras: A Country Study*, edited by James D. Rudolph (Washington, D.C.: American University). A useful recent book published in Honduras is Leticia Salomón, *Militarismo y reformismo en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 1982). Guatemalan politics also remains an underresearched area. See Thomas and Marjorie Melville, *Guatemala: The Politics of Land Ownership* (New York: Free Press, 1971) for a valuable, but dated, account. A new book by Jonathan L. Fried et al. (editors), *Guatemala in Rebellion: Unfinished History* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), has just been published. Some definitions of Central America include Panama and Belize as parts of the region. An important new study is Steve C. Ropp, *Panamanian Politics: From Guarded Nation to National Guard* (New York: Praeger, 1982).
4. Alfred Stepan, *The State and Society: Peru in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). See also Robert H. Dix, *Colombia: The Political Dimensions of Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); and Evelyne Huber Stephens, *The Politics of Workers' Participation: The Peruvian Approach in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Academic Press, 1980). A model study from outside the literature on Latin American politics is *Politics and Public Policy in Kenya and Tanzania*, edited by Joel D. Barkan and John J. Okumu (New York: Praeger, 1979). The reviewer's attempt to practice some of what he preaches is found in J. Mark Ruhl, "The Influence of Agrarian Structure on Political Stability in Honduras," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 26, no. 1 (Feb. 1984):33–68.
5. See Edelberto Torres Rivas, *Interpretación del desarrollo social centroamericano* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1971); also, Ciro F. S. Cardoso and Hector Pérez Brignoli, *Centroamérica y la economía occidental, 1520–1930* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universidad de Costa Rica, 1978). Woodward's study is noted above. See also Mario Monteforte Toledo, *Centro América: subdesarrollo y dependencia* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1972).
6. See Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979) for a good bibliography on the vast theoretical literature on comparative revolution and political instability.
7. See Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973); and *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, edited by David Collier (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
8. Thomas P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).
9. See William H. Durham, *Scarcity and Survival in Central America: The Ecological Origins of the Soccer War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979); and *La guerra inútil: análisis socio-económico del conflicto entre Honduras y El Salvador*, edited by Marco Virgilio

- Cariás and Daniel Slutzky (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1971). There are also a number of studies on the Central American Common Market, a regional economic arrangement that was damaged by the war. See *Economic Integration in Central America*, edited by William R. Cline and Enrique Delgado (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1978); and Daniel Camacho et al., *El fracaso social de la integración centroamericana* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1979).
10. Charles D. Ameringer, *Don Pepe: A Political Biography of José Figueres of Costa Rica* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979).
 11. See Samuel Stone, *La dinastía de los conquistadores: la crisis del poder en la Costa Rica contemporánea* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1975); and Mitchell A. Seligson, *Peasants of Costa Rica and the Development of Agrarian Capitalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).
 12. For example, Jacobo Schifter, *La fase oculta de la guerra civil en Costa Rica* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1979); José Luis Vega Carballo, "Etapas y procesos de la evolución socio-política de Costa Rica," *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos* 1 (Jan.–Apr. 1972):45–72; Lowell Gudmundson, *Estratificación socio-racial y economía de Costa Rica, 1700–1850* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1978); and Mark B. Rosenberg, *Las luchas por el seguro social en Costa Rica* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Costa Rica, 1980).
 13. See Mario Posas, *Luchas del movimiento obrero hondureño* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1981); and Victor Meza, *Historia del movimiento obrero hondureño* (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras, 1980). For an update on the status of the banana enclaves, consult Daniel Slutzky and Esther Alonso, *Empresas transnacionales y agricultura: el caso del enclave bananero en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 1982).
 14. Useful prior works on El Salvador include David Browning, *El Salvador: Landscape and Society* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971); and Alistair White, *El Salvador* (London: Ernest Benn, 1973).
 15. See John D. Martz and Enrique A. Baloyra, *Electoral Mobilization and Public Opinion: The Venezuelan Campaign of 1973* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).
 16. An excellent source for articles on Central America that often place their subjects within broader comparative and theoretical contexts is the journal *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos*, published in Costa Rica by the Confederación Universitaria Centroamericana.