
Review

Peter H. Smith
**Democracy in Latin America:
Political Change
in Comparative Perspective**

Oxford University Press, New York, 2012,
377 pp.

Peter H. Smith's impressively researched and densely packed volume about democracy in Latin America begins with vignettes about two charismatic political figures from the recent past: Hugo Chávez and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Although neither is in power (Lula completed his second presidential mandate in 2011 and Chávez died of cancer in 2013), Smith successfully argues that these former leaders epitomize the recent trends in Latin America's perpetual balancing act between liberal democracy and oligarchic authoritarianism. Both were populists who spearheaded the shift to the left (the so-called "pink tide") in Latin American politics after the collapse of the Washington Consensus of the 1990s, albeit with different electoral methods and degrees of repression. They are also illustrative of the strong presidential systems preferred by the vast majority of countries in Central and South America which, as sociologist Carlos Waisman emphasized during his lecture at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb on 15 October 2013, contribute to the institutionalization of *partial democracy*. Smith's book reaches similar conclusions to those of Waisman through the meticulous analysis of a vast

amount of empirical data on democratic indicators over the past hundred years in 19 countries, and although the geographical focus is on Latin America, the methodological approach makes this a valuable study for scholars of comparative political systems and post-authoritarian transitional societies.

One of this book's greatest strengths is the author's interdisciplinary and systematic approach in tracing the often overwhelming number of radical changes in Latin American politics since the beginning of the 20th century; coups, dictatorships, military juntas, foreign interventions, guerrilla movements, and the legacies of post-independence *caudillismo* (rule by paramilitary strongmen) characterized the political systems of the region more often than democracy and free elections. Smith expertly blends a historical overview of the political cycles with analysis from the fields of sociology, economics, and political science in order to identify not only the trends in the democratization of this continent, but also the causes and potential for long-term stability. The book is richly supported by a variety of tables, graphs, and charts that assist in understanding the various factors that the author identifies as constituting democracy, from the most explicit data on elections to more subtle indicators such as freedom of the press, the politics of economic inequality, the role of women in the public sector, health and education policies, and public trust in institutions. This edition was substantially updated from the first one, published in 1997, and incorporates many of the important changes over the past decade.

The book identifies roughly 3 waves of democratization: 1900s-1940s, 1940s-1970s,

and 1970s-2000s. Although the first third of the 20th century was characterized by struggles between various factions of oligarchs and landed elites (52% of that period could be considered to have been under non-democratic rule), the next period saw the rapid rise of mass political participation accompanied by authoritarian reactions from the threatened ruling classes (55% non-democratic) (pp. 29-31). Despite the grim fate of liberal democracy in the middle of the 20th century, when over 30 guerrilla movements fought entrenched authoritarian regimes, by the 1980s Latin America underwent the latest wave of democratization during which Smith identifies a drop to 24% of “country years” of non-democratic rule. He argues that the reason for the current success of democracy is that it has been “tamed”; elites have embraced the democratic process because it no longer directly threatens their interests (p. 313). Moreover, the recent “pink tide” shift to the left is not a result of populism, but a rational reaction to, and rejection of, the neo-liberal Washington Consensus which in turn grew out of the previous era of radical revolutions and Cold War politics.

Although on the one hand the statistics seem to support the rosy conclusion that electoral democracy is now the norm in Latin America, on the other hand they obfuscate the fact that substantively these societies are not truly liberal democracies. In fact, Smith argues that as of 2008, only 7 out of 19 countries can be considered liberal democracies, while 10 are illiberal democracies and 2 have semi-democratic political systems (interestingly, zero were categorized as authoritarian). Smith’s statistics support Waisman’s argument that

illiberal, or partial, democracies are not just a phase in Latin America’s transition from authoritarianism, but rather the long-term systems suited for the kind of socio-economic, demographic, and geopolitical conditions of this region. This book shows how public trust in institutions remains low, and efforts to shift away from presidential to more parliamentary forms of democracy were generally shelved, not by power-hungry dictators but often by the electorate. According to a 2013 Latino-barómetro poll, only about 40% of Latin Americans are satisfied with their democratic institutions, indicating that the desire for a strong-handed approach to fighting endemic crime, solving economic crises, and improving poor public services is still an option for many across the continent (*Economist*, 2 November 2013, p. 45). Furthermore, Smith’s analysis of labor movements and unions, indigenous rights, and the role of women in politics revealed that democracy did not always benefit these groups, nor were advances in health and education always associated with democratization. Smith also looks at the influence of international factors, namely the United States, which is proven to have had an incredibly *negative* impact on the strengthening of democracy in the region. For decades the White House clearly preferred loyal authoritarian regimes that remained economically subservient to democracies that resisted American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

The sheer breadth and scope of this volume is one of its rare weaknesses; the reader is simply overwhelmed by the quantity of information and statistics, and individual countries get lost in the text. However, Smith does make an effort to add context

and snippets of case studies to illustrate certain points, and it is hard to imagine such a comparative undertaking without losing some of the finer details. This valuable book is more than a comparison of Latin American countries, it is a deeper reflection on democratic systems and the meaning of democracy more broadly. The historical breadth of Smith's research material provides the field with an important analysis of the waves of democratization in the region and contributes to our understanding of the current political processes in Central and South America.

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Review

Robert Kusek and Joanna
Sanetra-Szeliga (eds.)
**Czy Polska leży nad Morzem
Śródziemnym? (Does Poland
Lie on the Mediterranean?)**

Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków/
International Cultural Centre, Krakow, 2012,
566 pp.

The key achievement of the contemporary excursions within cultural and political theory into geographical thinking (as part of the ongoing 'spatial turn' within the humanities and social sciences) is an irreversible questioning of the hitherto dominant premise that space and time are linked in a linear fixture, a premise which

seeks to cement that which immanently resists cementing. Space is a multilayered and open-ended process rather than a static and finished thing or container, it is at once fought over, constructed, destructed and demarcated as much as it is represented, imagined and practiced – and all those components create the relevant basis for political behaviour. Thus, if, as David Harvey once put it, "geography is too important to be left to geographers", it is only by opening up the debate about spaces as lived well beyond their physical locations – with a promiscuous engagement with various disciplines, like political sciences, philology, history, literary, media and cultural studies – that we can effectively grasp the ever-surprising work of power in the making and remaking of spaces.

There is much to be learnt about this important lesson from this compelling collection, the title of which is meant to do much more than surprise. Of course Poland is not a Mediterranean country, but upon reading this elegantly elaborated book it is impossible to simply confirm that old topographical fact and to move on charting other places along the same old-fashioned, static (and effectively, useless) map, not least without a "but...", followed by a (potentially endless) list of counter-arguments. The book's nineteen chapters, written mainly by Polish authors (coming from a staggering variety of disciplines) display Poland's affinity, at least amongst some of its leading intellectuals, to share the fate of the Mediterranean basin as a space of incessant cross-temporal interaction. Published by the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures, of which this book is openly a supporting project (part of the – thus far sadly ineffective –