

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Violence, Peacebuilding, and Democratic Struggles in Central America

Charles D. Brockett

Sewanee: The University of the South, US
cbrockett@sewanee.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizen Protest. By Paul Almeida. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 191. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781421414096.

Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy. By David Close. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016. Pp. vii + 254. \$59.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781626374355.

The Politics of Modern Central America: Civil War, Democratization, and Underdevelopment. By Fabrice Lehoucq. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. viii + 193. \$29.99 paper. ISBN: 9780521730792.

A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America. By Óscar Martínez, translated by John B. Washington and Daniela Ugaz. London: Verso, 2016. Pp. xv + 257. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9781784781682.

Enabling Peace in Guatemala: The Story of MINUGUA. By William Stanley. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013. Pp. xx + 325. \$25.00 paper. ISBN: 9781588266811.

Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador. By Jocelyn Viterna. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi + 288. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780199843657.

Captured Peace: Elites and Peacebuilding in El Salvador. By Christine J. Wade. Athens, OH: Ohio University Research in International Studies, 2016. Pp. ix + 273. \$27.96 paper. ISBN: 9780896802988.

After a long history of political instability and violence in Central America, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, many hoped that ending the region's major civil conflicts would also bring less violence and greater liberty to the region. Tragically this has not been the case for many. Instead, differences between the region's countries in conditions for the average citizen are much starker than a half-century ago, as recent scholarship documents.

Of the seven works discussed here, four drill for deep understanding into individual cases (two on El Salvador, one each on Guatemala and Nicaragua) while the other three compare and contrast the region's six countries (none discuss Belize). Their thematic scope varies as well, some narrowly focused in terms of period and/or subject with others more comprehensive in their objectives. Combined they provide a sophisticated understanding of the extent (or lack) of progress in building more peaceful societies in the region; for many of them, in fact, this is a dominant concern. Given this mix of approaches, themes, and time periods analyzed, this review is organized chronologically, with periods characterized by the dominant theme emerging from these works—violent civil conflict, peacebuilding, democratic struggles, and social violence.

Violent Civil Conflict

The most dramatic epoch in Central American history across the last century would undoubtedly be the violent civil conflicts that began with the Nicaraguan revolutionary movement that came to power in 1979, followed by the Contra War throughout the 1980s, as well as the coterminous civil wars of El Salvador and Guatemala. The literature on this period is voluminous yet there is still more to be said, as ably demonstrated by two of the works surveyed here: Fabrice Lehoucq's *Politics of Modern Central America: Civil War, Democratization, and Underdevelopment* and Jocelyn Viterna's *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador*.

Lehoucq's volume has the broadest scope of the seven works, comparing the six nations from the civil conflict period up to recent days. Beginning with a concise regional history up to 1980, the book would make an excellent core text on the region. But it is much more than this. The book is written as a contribution to three central debates in comparative politics and political economy, intending to correct what Lehoucq sees as a tendency to privilege economic and social determinants while underplaying the role of the political system (5–6).

For this period, the central issue of *The Politics of Modern Central America* is “whether civil war is a product of greed, grievance, or closed political systems” (2). From cross-national statistical analyses of civil war determinants and some of the regional literature, one might conclude that the driving force behind revolutionary movements is poverty and inequality. Lehoucq finds little support for this perspective in data on national income shares or real working-class wages (32–36). Instead, he follows other scholars in highlighting political variables, especially as aggregated under the concept of regime type. The essential argument is that, unlike the other three countries, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua were authoritarian regimes that at critical points were inconsistent in application of their repressive measures, in turn both allowing and provoking oppositional movements (38–39, 59–63). A particular strength of the central chapter is separate sections on each country that serve as good political history as well as documenting the argument. The same is true of the next chapter, which portrays the course of the civil conflicts and their settlement.

Viterna's *Women in War* is also concerned with the determinants of revolutionary mobilization, but the approach is quite different. She conducted 230 formal interviews with two broad goals, one descriptive and the other theoretical: first, “to bring to life the experiences” of Salvadoran women during the civil war (women were 30 percent of demobilized guerrillas); and second, “to develop a new framework for analyzing micro-level mobilization processes” (4–6). The recipient of multiple scholarly awards, this excellent study more than succeeds with both objectives.

A little over half of the interviewees were randomly selected women and men in six rural villages, about half of whom had been guerrillas. Other women who were identified as leaders in the same communities were also interviewed, as were guerrilla and other leaders. Viterna wonderfully succeeds in providing a felt sense of the variety of individual lives, portraying women in three different roles (guerrilla, collaborator, and nonparticipant). The book takes the reader through life prior to revolutionary recruitment and then the recruitment process itself; life during the war, with particular attention to women's experience in guerrilla camps (daily life, including the regulation of romance and reproduction) but also the experience of those who stayed in their home villages or moved to refugee camps or later to repopulation centers; and then demobilization and life after.

Viterna sees her book as contributing to three different theoretical literatures, and I would agree that the contribution to two of these—gender and social mobilization—is substantial (the third is political violence). Female interviewees almost universally told her that their life in guerrilla camps was better than what they experienced either before or later. However, an egalitarian gender narrative, although widely internalized among her informants, collapses under Viterna's analysis. Guerrilla job assignments were largely sex-segregated along traditional lines (men fighting, women cooking—though some were radio operators), justified by a narrative of “abilities.” Ironically, even those in the most gender-bending role of combatant found their postwar lives the least changed. What mattered more for life in peacetime has been educational credentials and political organizing experience, along with connections forged to powerful leaders. Self-identified feminists were not those who had been combatants but rather those whose postwar positions put them in contact with foreign feminist groups (211–216).

Gendered narratives are also central to *Women in War's* portrait of revolutionary mobilization in El Salvador. Viterna argues that gender “was one of the strongest tools mobilized by FMLN [Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional] narratives to mitigate the radicalness with which the public perceived their organization's violent acts” (204). FMLN violence was understood as defensive action by “the good

guys' in the civil conflict" (80). Even politicized younger women who joined the revolutionary ranks early in the conflict emphasized that they did so not by rejecting traditional identities but rather because "young women could maintain their sexual purity by *joining* the guerrillas, who respected women's bodies, and not by staying home to be raped by the Armed Forces" (112, emphasis in original).

Revolutionary motivations are a traditional subject of scholarly attention but are usually inferred from meso- or macro-level analyses. Too seldom do scholars undertake the time-consuming task of interviewing a large enough sample of individuals, as Viterna has done. Central to her micro-level analysis are identity and narrative. It was common for her interviewees to explain their joining the FMLN as a function of an identity that they held when they were recruited, such as woman, youth, and/or victim. Narratives are "the stories people tell to make sense of their experiences and justify their actions" as well as the "emotional, identity-based appeals for participation" used by revolutionary recruiters (45–48). Across all of the diversity among her respondents, Viterna found that they "overwhelmingly internalized the narrative that all youth, and all men, were obliged to join the FMLN" because "it was their responsibility." Joining was a question of morality (80).

How much did the civil war change El Salvador? For gender relations, not as much as one might infer from the extensive involvement of women in the revolutionary cause. Viterna's interviews took place about a decade after the war's end. For both those who had joined the guerrillas and those who had not, traditional identities prevailed: almost all of both sets "continue to live highly traditional lives dominated by care work for their family" (204).

Peacebuilding

Ending the Contra War against Nicaragua and the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala were difficult and lengthy processes involving multiple actors not just domestically but also internationally. Several of the works assessed here aid our understanding of the peacebuilding process in the region, especially William Stanley's *Enabling Peace in Guatemala: The Story of MINUGUA*, the definitive book on its subject.

The United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights and of Compliance with the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights in Guatemala (MINUGUA) began in 1994 as a human rights verification mission and then after the peace agreement in late 1996 stayed to verify compliance, ending in 2004. In addition, the UN played a leading role in mediating negotiations between the government and its armed opposition, the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG).

Stanley was provided access to the relevant UN files, from cable traffic to memorandums about high-level meetings, as well as interviews with many of the relevant UN actors in both New York and Guatemala. Although he did not have similar access to Guatemalan archives, the UN documents are replete with close reporting on Guatemalan actors and events, which are supplemented by his interviews with key domestic participants. Besides providing an in-depth description of the decade-long peacebuilding process, the book's objective is also analytic. Stanley's charge by the UN-affiliated think tank that sponsored the project was to provide an independent assessment of strategies that worked and those that did not.

Enabling Peace portrays MINUGUA as leaving Guatemala with "a more consolidated democracy, better human rights conditions, and modest reforms to key institutions" (1). However, it also identifies a number of management deficiencies (6–7). More damning are Stanley's assessments of the three Guatemalan administrations serving during MINUGUA's tenure and of domestic elites. A major theme of the book is "an asymmetry of motivation" between an international mission that was more committed to promoting peace and democratization than were its domestic counterparts (3–4). "The unavoidable truth," Stanley writes, "is that, with some shining exceptions, many Guatemalans in positions of power did the opposite. Among those with a share of power in a highly unequal and violent society, altruism seems to be in short supply, while opportunism abounds" (7).

These conclusions are thoroughly documented in chronologically organized chapters—one each on peace negotiations and human rights verification and four related to verification of the peace agreements. The peace negotiations did succeed, thanks in no small part to UN involvement, but elements of the key agreements made implementation difficult, particularly an "extraordinarily broad scope," many aspects of which would require approval by actors whose support was uncertain at best (55–56). Alongside the peace negotiations during 1994–1996, the UN was given the task of verifying the parties' compliance with human rights commitments to which they had agreed. Stanley sees this initial phase of MINUGUA as a clear success, providing "unprecedented nationwide scrutiny of human rights conditions" (96–97).

Verification of peace accords compliance was far more difficult. Powerful groups in business, the armed forces, and the media from the beginning opposed much of the accords. Most of the public was ill-informed

and uninterested. Outside of the Alvaro Arzú administration and the URNG, there was a widespread view that the agreements they had reached were their own project to advance their own interests. Soon the Arzú administration itself was backing away from the commitments that it had made (131–133). Much worse was the administration of Alfonso Portillo, which followed. Not only were prospects for progress nil, but corruption reached a “breathtaking level” with the government seeming to welcome its penetration by criminal hidden powers (209, 222).

Given this lack of support among key domestic actors, a major theme running throughout this account is the continuing attempt to find the right balance between supporting government efforts without enabling, holding the government accountable without provoking counterproductive responses (290–291). One time when the UN got it right was the behind-the-scenes work by top UN officials to check persistent efforts by the Guatemalan government to prevent the creation of an effective verification mission (126). Arguably a time when they got it wrong was during Portillo’s “egregious misrule.” Stanley could find no record of even discussions about withdrawing the mission during his administration, even in the second half when plans were being made for the mission’s eventual end (300).

Stanley finds the mission’s greatest contribution was at the local level through its constant conflict-resolution efforts and its capacity-building work with marginalized groups. More generally, too, MINUGUA’s presence and human rights monitoring contributed to a more open political climate (198, 293). Finally, though, what stands out from *Enabling Peace in Guatemala* is its portrait of entrenched, self-serving elites. As Stanley concludes, “The dominant elite goals have been maintenance of upper-class privilege, personal advancement and enrichment, suppression of enemies, and prevention of anything resembling a system of institutionalized legal accountability for wrongdoing” (289).

Democratic Struggles

The extent to which elites have been challenged and constrained varies, of course, between countries and across time. The contemporary period in Central America following the ending of the civil wars is the central concern of three of the books under consideration here, along with Lehoucq’s. Both Christine J. Wade’s *Captured Peace: Elites and Peacebuilding in El Salvador* and David Close’s *Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy* provide thorough and up-to-date case studies that would make excellent classroom texts. More narrowly focused but more broadly comparative, Paul Almeida’s *Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizen Protest* analyzes protest campaigns against neoliberal reforms in all six countries.

Case Studies: *El Salvador and Nicaragua*

As its title suggests, peacebuilding is a major concern of *Captured Peace*. Wade’s primary interest is the role of local actors in the peacebuilding process; she contends that their preferences and capacities receive insufficient attention in the relevant literature (6). Still, her conclusions are quite compatible with Stanley’s, despite their different approaches and even though the peace processes were quite different in the two countries. She effectively uses the concept of “compromised peacebuilding” from the work of Michael Barnett and Christoph Zürcher¹ to guide her analysis of how “state and local elites are able to redirect the distribution of assistance so that it maximizes their interests” (8).

Both the Salvadoran government of Alfredo Cristiani and the opposing FMLN invited the United Nations to mediate peace talks between the two sides; the first time, it did so to end a civil war. A cease-fire was negotiated to begin in February 1992, the guerrillas laid down their arms, and the military was placed under civilian control, with the UN overseeing the process on the ground. However, since all parties agreed to maintain the existing schedule of elections, it fell to Cristiani and his ARENA party to implement the peace agreement. Unlike Arzú’s party in Guatemala, which faded with his term’s end, ARENA won not only the 1994 presidential election but the two that followed.

Wade argues that Salvadoran elites were willing to sacrifice the military in order to make peace with the FMLN and to accept competitive elections because their incumbency allowed them “to effectively capture the peace.” Through the transition period ARENA controlled all key institutions, allowing the incumbents to either stall or fail to implement anticipated reforms while advancing elite economic interests (11, 69). Furthermore, ARENA used its position to facilitate its continuing incumbency, particularly by manipulating “the rules of the newly established democratic game through its control of the . . . electoral process,” generally,

¹ Michael Barnett and Christoph Zürcher, “The Peacebuilder’s Contract: How External Statebuilding Reinforces Weak Statehood,” in *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations*, ed. Roland Paris and Timothy D. Sisk (New York: Routledge, 2009).

and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) specifically (72). The argument is elaborated in a well-executed chronological chapter on electoral politics throughout the postwar era. With the TSE, for example, changes in its procedures enhanced ARENA domination of the body, which was then manifested in electoral rulings serving the party's interest (73–74). Alteration of power is often taken as a key sign of democratization and often furthers that process. Following the FMLN's first presidential victory in 2009, "there were notable improvements in the administration" of the TSE, but Wade questions, "Was it too little, too late?" (114).

Economic policy is a central area where ARENA used incumbency to the benefit of its elite supporters. Pressure for structural adjustment agreements from international financial institutions were congruent with ARENA's ideology and economic interests. As the governing party during the negotiating and transition period, ARENA was able to keep its neoliberal reforms off the negotiating table while furthering their implementation (116). This path continued throughout ARENA's tenure, and even after 2009 Wade finds little variation in broader economic policy under President Mauricio Funes. Consequently, she maintains, postwar policies have "failed to address the structural causes of poverty and inequality," while privatization's greatest beneficiaries were members of the government and their supporters.

Captured Peace draws on more than one hundred interviews with a wide range of individuals conducted during four residencies during 1999–2009. These are used to best effect in the chapter on economic policies, including a good discussion of rampant corruption as attested to even by businesspeople (144). To the extent that poverty and inequality have been reduced, this has resulted more from high levels of remittances from the 20 percent of native-born Salvadorans living abroad and their offspring rather than from economic policies (117–118, 138–141). A major cause of this massive emigration has been tragically high levels of violence associated with crime and gangs. Wade offers a detailed analysis of the causes of this violence and of the "ineffective" policy responses by the various administrations (160–175).

Could the elite capture of the Salvadoran peace process have been otherwise? Wade draws several important lessons. First, peace builders must attend to the "deeply rooted norms and structures" that ground elite entrenchment. Second, immediate power sharing is critical, unlike the FMLN's exclusion from policy implementation for more than two years. Third, international actors need to provide more equitable capacity building: the FMLN's transition from rebel movement to political party received no support comparable to that which ARENA received from the United States. Fourth, institution strengthening to meaningfully address corruption and impunity could be undertaken by using organizations such as the innovative and highly successful International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) (194–196).

David Close, in *Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy*, draws on three decades of study "to present a fresh perspective" on political life since 1979. He does so by organizing Nicaraguan political evolution not by party rule but rather by his primary theoretical concept: regime type. The manner in which this is implemented should allay concerns about ideological blinders. Close portrays President Daniel Ortega of 2015 as "an elected caudillo" presiding over a Nicaragua looking "uncomfortably similar to the way it did before the revolution" (14). However, he also marks Nicaragua's first electoral democracy as beginning with Ortega's 1984 victory. This came after the radical vanguardist regime of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), in which he also played a leading role and which followed the revolution against the Somoza dictatorship. This regime was then replaced by a power-sharing duopoly (2000–2011), and then by the current dominant power system based on personal rule.

To distinguish between regime types, Close analyzes how governments use political institutions, relationships between state and society, and what makes a government legitimate (18). Since Nicaragua experienced five different regimes in just forty years, the country provides abundant material for examining regime change as well. Here his intention is to bring greater sophistication to the study of transitioning toward (or away) from democracy, contending that scholars have "overestimated the capacity of well-intentioned political leaders to produce lasting regime transformation and correspondingly underestimated the power of structurally embedded obstacles to hamper, even derail, systemic reforms" (21).

Each regime is also evaluated through the prism of Close's second key concept—the quality of democracy—by assessing institutions, processes, and outcomes (29). The first FSLN regime, for example, although it was vanguardist and not a democracy since citizens had no formal opportunity to judge its performance, still did advance the quality of democracy by its steps "to permit the poor to participate in the political process on a more equal footing" (80–84). With the election of 1984 the FSLN remained in power, but the regime changed to an electoral democracy, with free and fair elections the only legitimate road to power. However, compared to a liberal democratic regime, "rights and freedoms may be restricted, political participation impeded, [and/or] the rule of law uncertain" (87–88). That this was a genuine movement in a democratic direction is bolstered by examining several cases during this period. His best proof is the 1990 election

that voted Ortega out of power. Each of the three presidents that followed all came from the political right. Close's verdict is that of the presidents serving during this period of electoral democracy, it was Ortega who most advanced its quality (102, 106).

Despite the wide ideological gap between them, President Arnaldo Alemán and ex-president Ortega forged a political pact in 2000, turning Nicaragua into a duopolist regime "run for the benefit of two caudillo-style political bosses" (129). Close effectively points to a long history of antecedents in Nicaragua's own history to establish this as a regime type, as well as to other countries, notably Colombia and Venezuela. Under the legalized duopolist pact the two dominant parties were guaranteed a quota of government positions based on election results, to the detriment of other political actors (101, 112). Both Alemán and Ortega had "unquestioned and unquestionable" control over their parties (123), even when the former's hand-picked successor served as president. Alemán's power, though, was upended by a major corruption scandal, and with Ortega's victory in 2006 the pact continued only as it served the latter's purposes.

By 2011 all pretense of any shared power had ended. Regime change once again was engineered from the top as Ortega transformed his rule to what Close, following Thomas Carothers, identifies as a dominant power system based on personal rule, with the central characteristic that there "appears to be little prospect of alternation of power in the foreseeable future" (135).² Harbingers of the change can be traced back to the municipal electoral fraud of 2008 (146–148) and electoral irregularities in Ortega's reelection victory of 2011. The motivation in 2011 perhaps was to ensure at least the 60 percent Sandinista seats in the legislature necessary for approving constitutional amendments. An end to term limitations and runoff elections soon followed, as well as legal changes bringing both the police and the military under the president's direct control. Close's conclusion is appropriate: "The quality of Nicaraguan democracy has declined steadily since Ortega's comeback" (151–154). Nonetheless, it would be inappropriate to label the regime as authoritarian because political pluralism remains, even if constrained (138, 178, 184). Neither would such a turn be necessary while his approval remains around 60 percent, as it has since 2011 (156). Undoubtedly an important reason for this support has been his policies directed at poverty reduction, which has been the steepest for Central America for the decade following 2002, especially for extreme poverty (economic growth, on the other hand, has been just average for the region) (141–142).

Throughout, Close addresses the paradox of stable governments yet unstable regimes—again, five regimes in four decades with three of those changes engineered by the sitting government. For his explanation, he turns to the other major concepts utilized throughout the book: polarization and personalism, both of which have been "a nearly constant factor in Nicaraguan political life since independence" (31). These two informal political institutions, then, have "trumped the formal, less deeply rooted institutions of electoral democracy" in contemporary Nicaragua (164).

Cross-National Studies

Democratization is the second central theme of Lehoucq's *Politics of Modern Central America*, sharing with Close a focus on regime types and quality of democracy. Lehoucq's core argument is that the region's civil wars were a primary facilitator of democratization through their mobilization of large numbers of citizens and because they undermined the traditional alliance between military officers and agro-exporting elites (67, 95). This argument applies not just to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua but also to Costa Rica (in 1948) and Panama (through the removal of dictator Manuel Noriega by US invasion in 1989), but less so to Honduras (89–92). Democratization was also greatly facilitated by the end of the Cold War, especially as it altered US regional priorities.

Democratization's subsequent course has varied between countries. Only three are classified as consistent democracies since 1994 (Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Panama), with Guatemala consistently a semi-democratic regime. Lehoucq's classification of Nicaragua shifts from democratic to semi-democratic in 2011 and for Honduras to an autocracy briefly following the 2009 coup and then semi-democratic (126–127). To explain the persistence of low-quality democracies, Lehoucq highlights the impact of poverty on the incentives of both the poor and elites as well as presidentialism, finding executive-legislative deadlock at the center of every case of contemporary authoritarian regression in the region (158–159).

A hallmark of higher-quality democracies is responsiveness to popular wishes, for example, for economic growth and a reduction of inequality. Since 1990 only Costa Rica and Panama have enjoyed consistent growth. Lehoucq gives an even-handed account of why this has been so. The civil war years were an

² Thomas Carothers, "End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 11–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003>.

immense economic setback for the entire region and did result in a need for intelligent stabilization policies. Investment and productivity have been weak—investors do require sufficient return on capital. However, a broader neoliberal program of reducing the role of the state is misguided. It is Costa Rica and Panama that have consistently extracted the most state revenues per capita, at rates two to three times the rest of the region (111); they have had the highest per capita social expenditures (with Costa Rica's around six times that of Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) (130) and have had the most pronounced impact of taxes and transfers on income inequality (132). In his statistical analysis, Lehoucq finds that what accounts for differences among Latin American countries in social spending is the age of a country's democracy and the percentage of the labor force that is unionized (151).

Many of these same factors are at work in Paul Almeida's comparative study of protest campaigns against neoliberal reforms in each Central American country. *Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizen Protest* points out that some of the largest protest campaigns in the contemporary developing world have been targeted against such reforms (14–15). Almeida examines the largest of these campaigns in each country between 1980 and 2013, based on his original data set of over 4,000 protest events drawn from multiple local news sources. Protest campaigns are differentiated from social movements as shorter-term acts of collective defiance focused on a particular policy (6). Through examining why some localities protest and others do not, his objective is to advance our understanding of subnational mobilization “in response to macro-globalization processes” (9).

His analytic framework centers on both state and community infrastructure. The assumption is that their availability facilitates protest; therefore participating municipalities should have more infrastructure than nonparticipants. State infrastructure has three dimensions: administrative (capitals of subnational political units), transportation (major highways), and universities. Community infrastructure consists of the number of associations and organizations. Almeida also highlights “strategic capital,” the “stockpiles of valuable information and experience” gained from past collective actions that can be drawn on to mobilize subsequent campaigns (25).

Almeida's most extensive case studies are Costa Rica followed by El Salvador and Panama; the least examined are Guatemala and Honduras. Costa Rica, he writes, “provides the template for patterns of protest” not only in Central America but perhaps for the democratizing developing world (63). The Costa Rican campaigns that he examines occurred when participants perceived neoliberal reforms as threats to the social guarantees gained in earlier periods of democratization and state-led development. These included proposals for an electricity price hike in 1983, a structural adjustment loan in 1995, the privatization of telecommunications and electricity in 2000, and the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) ratification across 2003–2007.

Data maps for the latter three campaigns show the differences in administrative infrastructure between municipalities. A more complete table is also presented for the 2000 antiprivatization campaign that includes data for community infrastructure and strategic capital indicators. Differences between the two sets of municipalities is as expected for all of the indicators. Still, even in the protesting municipalities only a minority present any of the indicators of administrative infrastructure (53). Not all of the campaigns were successful, but then determinants of success are not an objective of the study.

The analyses of El Salvador, Panama, and Nicaragua proceed in the same fashion. For El Salvador, three campaigns are described, with administrative infrastructure maps provided for two of them and a more complete data table for the health care privatization campaign of 2002–2003. For Panama, five campaigns are documented with administrative infrastructure maps, with a more complete data table for the health care and pension reform of 2005. Two extended periods are discussed for Nicaragua; data maps and fuller tables are provided for a specific campaign within each (austerity and privatization in 1990 and water privatization in 2003).

Across these cases the findings are broadly similar to those for Costa Rica, though the differences between the two sets of municipalities appear to be greater in Panama, while less in Nicaragua. Throughout, Almeida emphasizes the learning that occurs across campaigns, especially the importance of multisectoral coalitions for mobilizing protest campaigns (153–155). On the whole these coalitions have been driven by employees from a public sector that grew during the mid-twentieth century “at exceptional rates,” including, for example, teachers, professors, and workers in telecommunications, public health, and social security (156). Relevant here is Lehoucq's suggestion that perhaps one reason inequality measures show so little decline despite democratization has been the greater ability of urban public sector workers to promote and defend their interests, unlike rural workers and those in the informal sector (Lehoucq, 137–138).

Almeida also identifies country differences, particularly the role of nongovernmental organizations that are said to have played “an indispensable role” in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua “by mobilizing

excluded social groups, especially in the countryside" (157). This may be the case; but what stands out more, though receiving less attention in the conclusion, is the differing role of opposition leftist political parties (160). In Costa Rica the Citizen's Action Party (PAC) was prominent in the anti-CAFTA campaign. With ARENA administrations in El Salvador committed to neoliberal reforms, an alliance between the FMLN opposition and protesters was a natural development (86). The Sandinista sponsorship of mass organizations while in power in the 1980s provided the party with strong allies and with "a rich set of resources and experiences to use in campaigns to resist neoliberal measures" when the FSLN led the opposition during the following decade and a half (130).

Contemporary Social Violence

A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America by journalist Óscar Martínez compiles fourteen superbly investigated articles written between 2011 and 2015 for the Salvadoran website *elfaro.net*. They deal primarily with El Salvador and Guatemala, with one each based in Honduras and Nicaragua, while several essays extend into Mexico. Violence, corruption, and impunity are major themes running through the pieces, many of which are grounded in vivid portraits of the consequences for individuals, be they victims of sex traffickers, gangs, or police, and even for gang members themselves.

The Guatemalan essays primarily concern the vast corrupting presence of narco-traffickers in the country. Martínez's accounts are authoritative, for example, on the capture of a leading drug lord in 2011 (160–161). Another is his investigation of the relationship between the massacre of eight policemen in 2013 and the earlier deaths of seventeen in a shootout in 2008 between rival gangs (both in Huehuetenango). An especially compelling investigative work is his account of the study "Power Brokers in Petén," which documents links between land concentration, political elites, and drug lords. Martínez notes that everyone in Petén was talking about the study, but it was not covered in the media, nor were the authors known. After reaching out through many intermediaries he was able to talk with two of the researchers through Skype. They told him that they remained anonymous "because they knew well that the powerful people they referenced had strings to pull even on the international level" (69–70). Martínez contrasts in the essay the expulsion of 164 campesino families from the Sierra del Lacandón National Park by a force of 600 state personnel and the abject conditions in which they now live, with the hands-off treatment of a leading *narco* family's expropriation of large holdings in the same park.

The Salvadoran essays cover a broad range, often dealing with various aspects of the violence that has given the country one of the top homicide rates in the world. One concerns the dedicated work of El Salvador's only working forensic investigator and his efforts to excavate a well where a former gang member turned state witness has said that bodies will be found from a murder he witnessed. "The well is becoming a metaphor for the country," Martínez writes. "The deeper you dig, the worse things get" (103). Despite confronting one obstacle after another, 805 days later the bodies remained at the bottom of the well. In another essay Martínez describes the life of the informant, someone who admitted to having killed some 56 people himself. He had been living in a "safe house" next to a police station when his paltry monthly material support ended without explanation. Shortly after, he was slain almost in front of the police station.

The lives of females trafficked for sexual exploitation is portrayed in an essay that draws on the court transcript of a woman who was trying to emigrate to the United States but was sold into sexual slavery several times, the first by a local man she hired as her coyote. Buyers included the Zetas in northern Mexico as well as a bar in Guatemala that enslaved primarily Salvadoran women tricked into crossing the border for supposed better jobs. In both cases enslavement was enforced by great brutality, including watching the beating to death of the disobedient. One of the men who raped her and sold her in northern Mexico was brought to trial in El Salvador along with the local coyote. Claiming problems in her testimony, the judge absolved them both.

Martínez relates that, on his US book tour for his prior volume about attempted migration to the United States by Central Americans riding the rails, he repeatedly was asked, "What's your solution?" His response in publishing *A History of Violence* is this: "Because I believe that knowing is different from not knowing. I believe that knowing, especially with people like yours, who know how to wield politics, is the beginning of a solution" (xviii).

Conclusion

As the works surveyed here demonstrate, certain perennial characteristics of Central American sociopolitical life persist. Elites remain entrenched, often able to use the reins of power to perpetuate unequal structures and to direct public policy according to their own interests and ideology. Personalism and clientelism

continue as major links between leaders and supporters. And despite several decades now of no serious civil conflicts, social violence in the northern triangle countries is at world-leading levels, while corruption and impunity are rampant.

Democratization is not an easy process, as we are regrettably reminded time and time again. But meaningful change does occur. El Salvador and Panama have joined Costa Rica as democratic regimes. The magnitude of the alternation in power between ARENA and the FMLN through the (peaceful) elections of 2009 was historic, as was that in Nicaragua in 2006. If the FSLN under Ortega has been transformed from a broad-based popular movement under a collective leadership to a party subordinated to the wishes of its caudillo, in other critical aspects Nicaragua has not been turned back to 1979. The new narrowly based political elite in Nicaragua, while certainly self-serving, has also directed public policy toward serving the needs of the poor majority with substantial positive results. In this it joins the other three countries.

In the past Costa Rica was the regional outlier—a consolidated democracy with significant gains through public policy for the popular majority. Now the outliers are Guatemala and Honduras, both semi-democratic regimes, both with the highest levels of income inequality for the region, and both with the fewest governmental efforts to meaningfully address pervasive poverty and inequality. They are also the two countries lacking a recent English-language comprehensive examination of sociopolitical life such as those assessed here for El Salvador and Nicaragua, Orlando J. Pérez's book on Panama,³ and Juliana Martínez Franzoni and Diego Sánchez-Ancochea's study of Costa Rica (in a more specifically focused volume that explains how Costa Rica has developed the most successful universal health care system in all of Latin America).⁴

Citizens turn to their political systems to help them meet basic needs that concern their safety as well as their material well-being. Here again Guatemala and Honduras fall far short as they, along with El Salvador (and Belize), make the northern half of Central America the most dangerous region in the world outside of active war zones. Martínez closes one of his essays with a particularly haunting image. More than a dozen working-class families are abandoning their homes under threat from the gang Barrio 18. The police come, encouraging residents to stay, inviting them to all pray together. One resident responds, "Could you leave a policeman to guard every one of our doors forever?" (245).

Author Information

Charles D. Brockett has written two books and numerous journal articles on Central America. He is the contributing editor for *Central American Government and Politics* for the Hispanic Division of the Library of Congress's *Handbook of Latin American Studies*. He is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Sewanee: The University of the South.

³ Orlando J. Pérez, *Political Culture in Panama: Democracy after Invasion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴ Diego Sánchez-Ancochea and Juliana Martínez Franzoni, *Good Jobs and Social Services: How Costa Rica Achieved the Elusive Double Incorporation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

How to cite this article: Brockett, C. D. Violence, Peacebuilding, and Democratic Struggles in Central America. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(3), pp. 495–504. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.126>

Submitted: 31 January 2017

Accepted: 31 January 2017

Published: 22 September 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 