IDEALISM, IMPATIENCE, AND PESSIMISM:

Recent Studies of Democratization in Latin America

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ORDINARY PEOPLE IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES: THE CITIZENRY AND THE BREAKDOWN OF DEMOCRACY. By Nancy Bermeo. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Pp. 288. $19.95 paper.)

FUJIMORI'S COUP AND THE BREAKDOWN OF DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA. By Charles D. Kenney. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2004. Pp. 379. $30.00 paper.)

DEMOCRACY IN LATIN AMERICA. By George Philip. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003. $62.95 cloth, $27.95 paper.)

INCOMPLETE DEMOCRACY: POLITICAL DEMOCRATIZATION IN CHILE AND LATIN AMERICA. By Manuel Antonio Garretón. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003. $59.95 cloth, $24.95 paper.)

EL DESCONCIERTO DE LA POLÍTICA: LOS DESAFÍOS DE LA POLÍTICA DEMOCRÁTICA. By José Antonio Rivas Leone. (Mérida, Venezuela: Ediciones del Vicerrectorado Académico, 2003. Pp. 148.)

CÓMO DEMOCRATIZAR LA DEMOCRACIA?: CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL CONOCIMIENTO EN AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE. Edited by Johannes Maerk. (México, D.F.: Plaza y Valdés; Sociedad Jamahir, 2001. Pp. 163.)

As the books considered here reveal, one of the most widely studied topics in Latin America today is the development of democracy in the region. While such a topic would have been unlikely only two decades ago, today the democratization process is going forward in nearly every Latin American nation, making its study of supreme importance for those who wish to understand the contemporary circumstances. Despite the movement from dictatorship and human rights violations towards genuine processes of democratization (albeit imperfect and problematic), many of these books take a primarily negative, critical, and discouraged view of Latin American democracy. Such perspectives

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derive from a combination of limited empirical research, ideological idealism, impatience, and unfamiliarity with the processes and imperfections of democratization in other regions and other times.

One of the most important aspects of the scholarly study of democracy in Latin America is the opportunity it provides for cross-regional and historical comparisons that extend far beyond the Latin American continent and the last two decades. Studies of democratization in Latin America have ample previous research upon which to draw for theory, empirical measures, and possible methodological approaches, and can greatly extend our capacity for understanding if we draw on this previous work. The study of democracy abounds with respect to other regions of the world. The study of elections, campaigns, and citizen decision-making processes, institutions and institutional development, leadership, corruption and the multiple requisites for democratization[1] have all been the objects of systematic research and empirical data collection for many decades in the United States and Western Europe, where democracy is still flawed but considerably more advanced than it is in Latin America. These previous studies provide guidelines, examples, theoretical frameworks, and models of how data can systematically be collected and analyzed, and can assist in establishing realistic comparative guidelines on how democracy develops and how rapidly it improves. All such guidance is useful for students of democratization in Latin America today, provided they are prepared to engage in systematic empirical research.

One essential contribution to Latin American democratic studies is cross-national, empirical research that places the region's democracies in historical and global perspective. Nancy Bermeo's Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times does precisely this. Bermeo draws upon an impressive array of sources on democratic breakdown in Eastern and Western Europe and Latin America, particularly the Southern Cone. The fundamental argument of the book is that average citizens do not and have not supported democratic breakdown. In times of crisis, particularly economic crisis, most citizens in most countries have gravitated toward the political center, have been supportive of democratic institutions, and have demonstrated reluctance to condone the dismantling of democracy undertaken by the military, anti-democratic charismatic leaders, international actors, or powerful businessmen. When democracy has broken down in either Europe or Latin America, it has been because political elites deliberately dismantled it or polarized among themselves such that the negotiation and compromise essential to democracy were no longer possible.

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[1] Key (1955,1966, 1984); Dalton (2002); Fiorina (1981); Sniderman et al. (1991); Huntington (1968); Thelen et al. (1992); Genovese (2001); Ehrmann (1983); Scott (1972); Dahl (1956, 1971); Lipset (1959, 1960, 1963).

Bermeo's assertion, based on extensive cross-regional examination of the multiple studies available on democratic breakdown across three regions, flies in the face of much previous scholarship. Earlier studies have normally centralized citizen behavior as a key cause of democratic breakdown in all of these geographical areas. The most important example of this general argument and the one Bermeo emphasizes is Giovanni Sartori's (1976) position that democratic breakdown happens when people, (i.e., average citizens), polarize on the left and the right, making compromise impossible and democratic breakdown inevitable. In making her case, Bermeo examines the behavior of ordinary citizens, voting records and public opinion polls where available as well as historical records of public demonstrations and mass behavior in nearly every case of democratic breakdown in the twentieth century. It is an impressive example of the value of broad, cross-regional and historical reach, and intellectual command of detail.

Yet my sense is that Bermeo sometimes overstates her case. Some citizens do become extreme (an obvious case is popular support for Hitler) and support anti-democratic elite behavior, contributing to democratic breakdown. Overt or tacit support from at least some sectors of the population for actors who intervene to destroy democracy has often been essential to democratic breakdown. An obvious case is the destruction of Argentine democracy in 1976 when the military had, and knew they had, a significant level of support from some sectors of the population. Ordinary citizens have not always been pro-democratic. Yet Bermeo provides an important and much-needed rebalancing of our understanding of the popular role in democratic breakdown. Her position also provides a welcome breath of hope and optimism about the role of average citizens in supporting and sustaining democracy and about the prospects for democratization in a future where popular political involvement is increasingly common.

There are important subtleties to Bermeo's argument. Whereas her position that citizens have not been the cause of democratic breakdown is supported by her evidence, she acknowledges that citizens have failed to turn out in force to fight or to demonstrate in support of democracy. For the most part, citizens have simply let democracy die, primarily out of fear. The only exception to this general trend that Bermeo considers is the very important example of Spain in the 1930s. In the face of the fascist onslaught, average Spanish citizens went to war in the tens of thousands to fight for democracy. Unfortunately, they lost. But fight they did and their willingness to fight fascism and die in the process stands as an important example of citizen support for democracy. Another example of citizen mobilization in support of democracy but one that Bermeo does not consider is recent popular demonstrations in Nicaragua against the corruption and illegal behavior of former president

Arnoldo Alemán (See Anderson and Dodd 2005, esp. chap. 7). Again, it is the example of popular mobilization for democracy that is unusual.

Despite its focus on the role of average citizens, Bermeo's is an elitist argument, or, more precisely, an anti-elitist argument in which democratic breakdown is due to elite behavior and choices. Bermeo explains that the anti-democratic choices of political elites are result from elites' inability to assess public opinion in the systematic manner now available in all most democratic nations. In the past, the assessment of public opinion by elites was limited to drawing upon popular behavior in public spaces (i.e., in the streets and public demonstrations). Such behavior, as in the German case, appeared to support overwhelmingly the anti-democratic behavior of elites. But, says Bermeo, public spaces are precisely the spaces most likely to be filled by extremists of either left or right, activists who feel strongly one way or the other. Activists are only a tiny fraction of total public opinion and not broadly representative of the general public at all, but they can make a great deal of noise, break windows, and burn shops and public buildings. These behaviors generally frighten elites, particularly those on the right who value political stability. In their fear, such elites then act to dismantle democracy even while most of the public still supports democratic process and institutions. This conclusion leaves room for optimism: where elites take the time to gather public opinion more generally, they will find that ordinary citizens are far more supportive of democracy and far less politically polarized than they suppose.[2]

A second crucial contribution to the study of Latin American democracies is research based upon in-depth case studies, detailed empirical data, and systematic analysis revealing the specifics of a single democratization process. Charles Kenney's book, Fujimori's Coup and the Breakdown of Democracy in Latin America, exemplifies the value of this kind of study. Like Bermeo's work, Kenney's book is also a study of democratic breakdown, this time in a single country. But unlike Bermeo, Kenny's work has an institutional focus rather than stressing public opinion and elite behavior. Whereas Bermeo provides an explanation for democratic breakdown based on deliberate choices and actions by elites, Kenney provides an explanation for democratic breakdown based on institutional relations inherent to Peru's constitutional framework.

Kenney relies on the theoretical literature of Latin America. In particular, he draws on Juan Linz's argument that democratic breakdown is caused by institutional conflict generally, and specifically by situations where the president lacks a majoritarian Congress. Linz suggests that presidential democracy enables this kind of conflict and breakdown because the separate electoral mandates it produces for the legislative and executive branches make such conflict more likely than they would be in a parliamentary democracy where no separate mandate exists (See Linz 1994).

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[2] Alan Wolfe's (1998) close qualitative study of the American middle class supports Bermeo's contention about the centrist and consensual nature of democratic citizens; on the other hand, the recently published work of Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2004) suggests that political elites may polarize despite ample evidence of the centrist tendencies of average citizens, at least in the contemporary United States.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork between 1990 and the end of the Fujimori years in 2000, Kenney demonstrates how the Peruvian Congress, an institution with a history of powerful, independent action, repeatedly found itself in conflict with Fujimori's policies. While there were times when the president's policies were problematic, according to Kenney there were also multiple instances when the Congress was obstructionist, deliberately producing collisions with the president, choosing to move slowly when swift action was needed, denying Fujimori permission to leave the country for legitimate purposes, and generally refusing cooperation. Kenney shows that as executive-legislative relations deteriorated, the Peruvian Congress considered removing Fujimori from office, an action that they could undertake within constitutional provisions. When it became clear that the Congress might remove him from office, Fujimori closed the Congress, thus taking a definitive step toward authoritarianism.

The strength of Kenney's book lies in its extraordinary amount of original data and research. Few recent works provide such an extensive, detailed account of political developments during the Fujimori presidency. Students of Peru will find the chapters of detailed chronology extremely useful. However, Kenney's argument is somewhat sympathetic towards Fujimori, and thus may be quite controversial, particularly in view of Fujimori's continued and increasingly lawless behavior long after the closure of the Peruvian Congress. Another concern lies in the book's uncritical use of its theoretical framework.

Kenney gives no explicit recognition that in a presidential system the Congress is supposed to be independent: following its own agenda, and making its own decisions. In a presidential democracy, this checking action is part of the essence of democratic function. A theory or a case study that proceeds without considering that such tension, rather than portending democratic breakdown provides evidence of proper democratic function, is problematic. When the case in question is one of a president whose behavior also demonstrated scant regard for the law, such tension, and the institutional design that causes it, may be democracy's last best chance.

Likewise, the book fails to address effectively the historical weaknesses associated with parliamentarism, such as its tendency toward easy government turnover and the comparative advantages of presidentialism. These have led many analysts to prefer the latter or to propose a hybrid combination of the two.[3] Similarly, by drawing on only one case and limiting his perspective to Latin America, Kenney fails to frame his empirical evidence within the context of other developing legislatures.[4] Perhaps most critically, Kenney does not recognize that democracy elsewhere, including in the United States and Europe, has often experienced situations where the president lacked a legislative majority, but democracy did not break down, nor did the president find it necessary to close Congress (Mayhew 1991; Fiorina 1996). Even within Latin America we find examples of executive-legislative conflict, including recent events in Mexico and the Alfonsín presidency in Argentina (1983–1989) to name only two. In Mexico, a PRI-dominated Congress has thwarted many of President Vicente Fox's policies, and yet the latter has continued to work with the legislature. During Alfonsín's presidency a Peronist-dominated Congress opposed nearly every aspect of the President's policies, and yet Alfonsín did not find it necessary to close the legislature. Why, then, was Peru different? Why did Fujimori find it necessary to close Congress when other presidents more committed to democracy and confronted with similar situations did not?

Kenney does suggest that other factors also contributed to Peru's democratic breakdown, including a threatening terrorist organization that brought fear to unprecedented levels in Peru, the personality of Fujimori himself and his limited commitment to democracy and a perceived threat of military takeover that influenced both the legislature and the president. The answer to the question of why Peru was different probably lies in these other factors more than in the country's institutional configuration, since parliaments have also been closed (as in Germany and Italy) in response to crisis and executive authoritarianism.

Like Kenney's work, George Philip's Democracy in Latin America, seeks understanding of democratic shortcomings. An effort to look across the continent broadly and more closely at Venezuela, Mexico and Peru, the book holds policy insights into Latin America but lacks both systematic data analysis and a coherent theoretical position. The book begins by arguing that Latin American democracies are unconsolidated largely because of a lack of institutions but never returns to that argument. It concludes with stating that the region's greatest problem is the failure of countries to develop their economies. While the two causal arguments are not necessarily contradictory, neither are they obviously compatible. The author needs to tie them together or spell out explicitly how they combine. Nevertheless, the book will be helpful as an introductory overview of problems in Latin American democracy and should be useful for undergraduates.

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[3] In the interwar years and with respect to European democracy, the argument was that parliamentary democracy was unstable and had contributed to democratic breakdown. See, for example, Mommsen (1996). This issue is explored with respect to European democracies more generally in Dodd (1976).

[4] Polsby (1968), Young (1966), and Swift (1996) show that the U.S. Congress took considerable time to develop institutionalized patterns of organizational life and policy decision-making; Lee and Oppenheimer (1999) show how early institutional design affects Congressional function today.

Philip's criticism of Latin American democracy fits with the remaining volumes reviewed here, all of which evidence deep dissatisfaction with democracy in Latin America. The specific complaints vary, but democracy's failure to redistribute resources more equitably is primary among them. This particular criticism is central in Manuel Antonio Garretón's, Incomplete Democracy: Political Democratization in Chile and Latin America. Unlike Bermeo's and Kenney's books, Incomplete Democracy is a reflective work evaluating the state of democracy in Chile specifically and Latin America more broadly rather than a book based on original scholarly research. A collection of chapters and articles from several other works previously published in Spanish, Incomplete Democracy illustrates that Garretón has a very low opinion of the state of democracy in Chile and Latin America.

As always, Garretón's work is interesting and thought-provoking. He explicitly rejects any definition of democracy that he calls "minimalist" wherein the emphasis is upon human and civil rights, regular, fair elections, and democratic institutions. Garretón acknowledges that minimalist democracy is far better than dictatorship. But he criticizes democracy for neglecting and excluding the poor and for failing to redistribute resources equitably within "one generation" (65). Since Chile's democracy continues to have poor and marginalized people, it is still incomplete. Relatedly, he notes that Chilean political parties have lost the popular following they once had. Beyond the redistribution of resources, Garretón is dissatisfied with democracy because there is no goal upon which everyone can agree beyond the minimalist definition given above. The only thing people can agree upon is the process itself and it is by that process of dialogue that goals are chosen and pursued. Therefore, he says, democracy is nothing more than an ongoing process of negotiation. He is clearly dissatisfied both with that process and with its accomplishments.

Garretón's work comes out of the grand European tradition of critical sociology, which historically has had a powerful intellectual influence in Latin America and particularly in South America. From that tradition, reference to empirical concerns is of less importance than is critical assessment. Accordingly, Garretón's standard for evaluating democracy is not comparison with any particular established democracy or group of democracies in the real world but rather a leftist ideal that includes economic democracy within the definition of democracy and that expects economic redistribution quickly. By that ideal, of course, all democracies are incomplete and imperfect, not least of all the new democracies of Latin America. No established democracy has ever achieved resource redistribution within one generation, and this is true even of the democracies in Scandinavia, which are arguably the most equitable in the world.

Similarly, Garretón is highly critical of the international context in which Latin American democracies are developing. He sees that context as the international business environment, centralizing the power of international corporations and capital. These corporations are a negative influence because they only increase poverty and marginality in Chile and elsewhere, and domestic citizens have only minimal influence upon them. International capital certainly complicates and sometimes undermines democratization efforts. However, the international context is more varied and complex than Garretón discusses.

Apart from the multinational corporations that Garretón emphasizes, there are influences that he overlooks. These include widespread international norms protecting human rights that did not exist thirty years ago; international expectations of regular elections; and instances where international actors have insisted upon elections that guarantee the continuation of the democratic process of dialogue. International influences also have pressured nations to rid themselves of presidents who break constitutional laws, and have made efforts towards environmental protection. Some of these influences either undermine or do not support the domestic process of democratization in any given nation. But other international influences have acted to support democratization when domestic actors have been unable or unwilling to do so. This second and more positive aspect of the international context remains absent from Garretón's reflections about the incomplete nature of democracy in Chile and elsewhere.

Of interest in Garretón's book is the section on "authoritarian enclaves" within Chile's incompletely democratic society. Within these, he argues, the old rules of authoritarianism still predominate, limiting democratic potential in Chile. Data on the political impact of such enclaves and their impact on democracy would help us understand the implications of the criticism Garretón is making, perhaps even suggesting antidotes. In general, Garretón's book will be useful as a guide to contemporary Chilean politics. It gives a detailed chronological account of events in Chile from 1970 through 2003, including the Allende and Pinochet years, the plebiscite, the London arrest of Pinochet, and the last three elections. These appear specifically in chapters 9 through 11. All of these topics are covered in about seventy-seven pages and are accessible to students and analysts uninitiated to Chile. It has been some time now since a good descriptive account of Chilean politics appeared, and this is a welcome contribution in that regard. This book also provides an impressive example of critical sociological analysis within the Latin American context.

The critical sociological tradition that Garretón uses to evaluate Latin American democracy is valuable in pointing to important problems like the authoritarian enclaves, and more of such evaluation would also facilitate the scholarly understanding of the problems in advanced democracies. At the same time, empirical evidence and systematic data analysis would likewise improve the strength of criticisms such as Garretón's and those of other Latin American authors reviewed here. It could also lead scholars like Garretón to be more attentive to the real-world conditions that shape and constrain resource distribution so that their work can contribute to its realization rather than to a sense of discouragement that undermines progress.

José Antonio Rivas Leone's book, El Desconcierto de la Política: Los Desafíos de la Política Democrática, is yet another highly critical perspective on Latin American democracy, particularly the Venezuelan case. While Garretón emphasizes citizen rejection of political parties as a problem with democracy, Rivas Leone focuses on personalized politics as problematic in the Venezuelan case. For the author, the two issues are connected since citizen rejection of political parties has given rise to personalistic leaders who then discount or reject parties.

Like Garretón, Rivas Leone clearly thinks that democracy, particularly in Venezuela, should by now have achieved much more than it has. In particular, Venezuelan democracy falls short for not having delivered equality (103). It is certainly the case that recent events in Venezuela have been disappointing with respect to democratic development. In some ways Venezuela even appears to be moving backward while democracy in many other Latin American nations is progressing. Yet Rivas Leone misses an opportunity to collect data that would specifically address the problems of Venezuelan democracy. His book leaves the reader wondering what we could learn about future democratic dangers by studying the Venezuelan case. Is it the case that Venezuela is devoid of promising paths toward democracy that could be highlighted and reinforced by close empirical scholarship?

The volume edited by Johannes Maerk, ¿Cómo Democratizar la Democracia?, is similar to the works reviewed above in its critical approach to Latin American democracy. This is the only edited volume reviewed here and space disallows a specific consideration of each of the chapters in the book. A result of a conference on democracy held in Vienna, Maerk's book is unique in making a conscious effort to apply political theory to the understanding of democratic inadequacy in Latin America. The effort to incorporate political theory into our consideration of democracy will make the book of interest to those who wish to ponder contemporary problems in the light of philosophy. As with the critical sociology referred to above, the political theorists in Maerk's volume assume an ideal standard. Applied to Latin America, ideological theory shows how democracy falls short. Such idealism is useful in providing a purist standard but it omits a sense of real-world process whereby we can understand the conditions that facilitate or hinder Latin American democracy.

Before political theory or critical sociology go too far toward discrediting contemporary democratization processes in Latin America, students of Latin American democracies need a concentrated effort to gather and analyze empirical evidence about such democracies, including both gathering data comparing the Latin American experience with democratization processes in earlier eras (or with similar processes in other regions) and undertaking careful case studies that rely on in-depth empirical data on one or two nations. Of the books reviewed here, Bermeo's work exemplifies the first method while Kenney's exemplifies the second. It is through such scholarly research that we can best learn about democratization in Latin America and elsewhere, determine where and how Latin American democracy is more or less successful, and draw conclusions about how democracy can improve. Such comparison would show whether Latin American democracy is on par with, behind, or ahead of the level of progress achieved by other democracies after about twenty years.

The other works reviewed here fall into a second category, one of critical reflection on the state of democracy across Latin America. These are useful in highlighting ideal standards and, as with Garretón, in isolating specific problems. But they have important shortcomings that limit their utility for scholars and students. These could be addressed by systematic scholarly research, by a cross-regional and historical perspective, and by scholarly realism about democracy's possibilities. While a central part of the scholar's task is to be reflective and critical, criticism must be balanced with attentiveness to empirical reality and with acknowledgment of progress. Without such efforts at balance, the relentless criticisms of contemporary Latin American democracy may leave the dangerous impression that imperfect and incomplete democracy is without value and can be ended by its enemies without repercussions or opposition. They also create unrealistic popular expectations that terminate in popular anger when democracy does not deliver the ideal immediately. While these authors may not mean to endanger democracy with their message, an historical look at the older democracies will remind us that democracy has broken down when its own citizens focused only on its shortcomings without acknowledging that it is, after all, a type of government "better than all the others."

Democracy in Latin America or elsewhere never promised to be perfect or to solve all problems, particularly that of poverty. Much less did it promise to deliver equality within one generation. Any leader who makes such a promise to an inexperienced citizenry is only setting democracy up for a fall, and a dangerous one at that. All democracy ever promised was to give citizens more opportunities to choose and influence their government and its policies than any other system has ever done, all within constitutional parameters and state protections of civil liberties and human rights. This is all that democracy has ever promised anywhere and all that it has delivered. Anything else and anything more is up to the citizens and their leaders. If what has been delivered falls short of expectations, then that is not the fault of democracy. It is due to the failure of citizens and leaders to take full advantage of the opportunities democracy provides.

There is a deep and potentially disconcerting impatience in the criticisms being leveled at Latin American democracy. All established democracies today have reached their current state through multiple generations of that process of negotiation that Garretón finds so inadequate. All the problems attributed to Latin American democracies have appeared in the older democracies and have been addressed there, but only over many generations of gradual democratic development. To expect today's new democracies to reach a similar level of achievement in about twenty years may be expecting more of them than older democracies have delivered in the past. As scholars, we can facilitate movement toward democratic development through systematic research such as that achieved by Bermeo and Kenney.

Perhaps most troubling, there is within these critical works an unwillingness to consider full responsibility on the domestic front. Critics of Latin American democracy blame the United States, globalization, international capital, and so on, for democracy's shortcomings and certainly these factors bear some responsibility for the problematic nature of Latin American democracy today. But there are also domestic reasons for democracy's shortcomings. For example, there are reasons why citizens have rejected parties, and it would be helpful for the parties, their leaders, and their scholarly allies to consider what those reasons are. Why do Latin American societies repeatedly produce personalistic leaders who use power for personal self-aggrandizement and why do citizens gravitate toward such charismatic leadership? Is a lack of education part of the answer? Is a particular culture of leadership the answer? These questions lend themselves to systematic scholarly research. There are many aspects of Latin American democracy that we do not understand. Now that democracy is functioning in the region, however incomplete it may be, we have an unprecedented opportunity to learn why and how Latin American democracy is imperfect and unconsolidated. Moreover, in democratizing after most of Western Europe and simultaneously with Eastern Europe, Latin America offers a valuable opportunity for comparative democratic studies that will only enhance our comprehension of Latin American democracy. Our insights into democracy's assets and problems will progress through scholarly attention to the relative concrete achievements made as well as to criticism of democracy's shortcomings.

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