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Latin American Politics and Development, 7th ed. - Howard j. Wiarda and Harvey F. Kline (eds.)

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Review

Latin American Politics and Development, 7th ed.

Howard J. Wiarda and Harvey F. Kline (eds). Boulder, CO:
Westview Press, 2011. 656 pp.

Paul C. Sondrol^{*}

The scholarly literature on the government and politics of Latin America continues to flourish, offering interesting research questions and cross-national comparisons touching on a variety of themes that continue trends from the past. Howard J. Wiarda and Harvey Kline's (eds) *Latin American Politics and Development* is the most recent edition of the popular text on the government and politics in Latin America, revised and updated on recent developments since 2000. Leading specialists on the region provide an overview of Latin American development, policy processes, and key actors (the military, the Catholic Church, the landed oligarchy, bureaucracies, political parties and elections, etc.). Of particular import are the many chapters that illustrate the vitality and complexity of women's movements. By analyzing women's roles in very diverse democratic transitions, goals and strategies in consolidating democracies that help bring women to power, the various chapters demonstrate the distance women's movements in Latin America have travelled, and that much terrain remains to be covered against resistant patriarchal societies in the region.

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Wiarda and Kline and various authors cogently argue regarding the role of the Roman Catholic Church and social change in Latin America results from the continuing importance of Christianity as a source of inspiration and legitimation of political ideas, ideologies and social movements. The primary thesis is that mainstream Catholicism in Latin America now supports democracy and has contributed to democratic consensus in civil society, and that the extremes of left (revolutionary liberationists) and right (integralist authoritarians) are today much weaker than in the past.

The volume contains no bibliography, but each chapter contains a recent list of suggested readings for those who want to probe the subject further. A well-crafted subject index provides a useful tool for targeting major themes treated by the authors. Moreover, the work analyses the problems of democracy and development in Latin America, examining the conditions and variables; political culture and structure, grass-roots democratic practices, and economic crisis management, that are essential to constructing and consolidating a democratic regime.

This text closes a gap in the literature on transitions from authoritarianism by addressing specific problems in democratic consolidation including the political consequences of economic reform programs (the so-called Washington Consensus), racism, labor repression, maldistribution of wealth, politicized militaries, and the external context for democratization. That is, the increased reliance on multilateral diplomacy and international organizations in the aftermath of the Cold War has brought pressure to bear on semi-authoritarian regimes (Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela) in the region. Unfortunately, as is the case in many edited work, not all of the authors devote much discussion to the “international arena,” or “foreign policy” and are seriously lacking regarding the important role of inter-American relations.

Another political theme adeptly analyzed by Wiarda and Kline is the diffusion and distortion of the North American model of presidentialism in Latin America. They argue that a clash of values occurred between the importation of a new, alien, liberal and secular constitutional arrangement of the United States, juxtaposed to the feudalistic, organic, aristocratic and Catholic socio-cultural values in Latin America. From this clash emerged the particular brand of Latin American presidentialism; powerful and a more culturally congruent alternative model of executive arrangement, than merely an historical aberration, as some have argued.

Other themes analyzed and explicated is the Latin American drug phenomenon (production, distribution and drug cartels, consumption and abuse, trafficking and money laundering) and the consequent, multidimensional, region-wide ripple-effects upon almost all aspects of life in the region. This is particularly relevant regarding the extreme violence taking place in contemporary Mexico, as the drug lords vie for control over turf and distribution routes into the United States.

Elements of judicial reform are also discussed by many authors. As political and economic development continue, greater attention is now given to judicial reform in many Latin American countries. Basic elements of judicial reform include: guaranteeing judicial independence through changes in judicial budgeting, judicial appointment and disciplinary systems, adopting procedural reforms, enhancing public access to justice, incorporating gender issues in the reform process, and redefining/expanding legal and educational training. Of course, the success of these efforts varies across nations of the region.

Latin America's think tanks are also discussed in many of the book's twenty-six chapters. Specifically, the growing importance of nonprofit private research centers, that have largely displaced public universities and have achieved a leadership sometimes bordering on a monopoly in social research in most of Latin America. The various authors identify and examine key factors (state repression, state weakness, public university problems, and finance) accelerating the massive growth of nonprofit activity.

This edited work offers a comprehensive analysis of the multicultural complexities of the myriad of issues confronting Latin America today; growth without distribution, hyperinflation, lingering praetorian impulses, and cultures not always supportive of democracy. For students of Latin American politics and inter-American relations, Wiarda and Kline's text is informative and intellectually challenging and is worth buying and careful reading.