

population as a solution, but as a perpetuation of the crisis. The ‘ghost’ of populism (or the return of the ghost, never quite gone, always hovering around) is the main focus of the last section. It starts with Marianne Braig’s short theoretical discussion about the age-old tension between populism and democracy and continues with Nikolaus Werz and Simone Winkens’ discussion of the role of the media in legitimising and undermining the Venezuelan president’s charismatic rule. Finally, the book ends with former Venezuelan diplomat Demetrio Boersner’s analysis of the nature and impact of Chávez’s foreign policy. Boersner stresses the gap between the revolutionary rhetoric and the much milder practice, echoing what another diplomat, a former US ambassador to Venezuela, said: ‘pay attention not to what Chávez says but to what he does’.

Venezuela en retrospectiva suffers from flaws that are typical of an edited volume. The contributions promote disparate views on Chávez; thus, rather than presenting a homogeneous perspective, the book lacks a clear unifying theme. There is of course no simple formula that will achieve a balance between many contributions, but perhaps a framing chapter providing an analytical structure for the volume would advance the work greatly toward that goal. The introduction, however, lacks an overview of all the chapters. Further, the volume suffers from the absence of a conclusion in which – in light of all the contributions – the purported guiding theme (is the Bolivarian regime new and innovative or old and typical?) is taken head-on. Moreover, the bulk of the book comes from 2004, and some sections have not aged well. For instance, many voices announce throughout the imminent (and unavoidable) failure of the revolution, or the fall of Chávez; these reports of Chávez’s demise have, of course, been greatly exaggerated. A question more relevant and suitable for the contemporary situation is that posed by Boeckh and Graf: do Bolivarianism and its critique of free-market globalisation represent the beginning of a new movement that will be taken up by other governments (p. 172)? In the light of the trendy argument regarding the ‘left turn’ in Latin American politics and in the context of the current upheaval in global capitalism, this question is at the centre of these troubled times.

These objections, however, should not detract from the merits of the book in providing many diverse and useful readings of the roots and the present of a revolution whose participants perceive themselves as the vanguard of a new world order not only for Venezuela and Latin America, but for humanity itself.

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Robert H. Wilson, Peter M. Ward, Peter K. Spink and Victoria E. Rodríguez, with Marta Ferreira Santos Farah, Lawrence S. Graham, Pedro Jacobi, Allison M. Rowland et al., *Governance in the Americas: Decentralization, Democracy, and Subnational Government in Brazil, Mexico, and the USA* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. vii + 337, \$35.00; £28.45, pb.

The literature on decentralisation and subnational governance in Latin America and elsewhere has expanded rapidly over the past decade. Scholars have explored many facets of these two phenomena through both detailed country studies and broader comparative analyses. Not only have we learned a great deal about the specific challenges entailed in subnational governance, but we have also advanced our

theoretical understanding of both the causes and consequences of decentralisation. *Governance in the Americas* enters this rich and dynamic field with an unusually ambitious agenda.

The book emerged out of a promising intellectual project. The co-authors, all experts in public policy, combine considerable knowledge of both Mexico and Brazil. The idea of comparing the three largest federal systems in the Americas excites the imagination, given its potential to advance our understanding of how *federalism* shapes democratic development (or vice versa). Including the United States as another case rightly challenges tired conceptions of ‘American exceptionalism’. The book sets forth a challenging agenda encompassing a comparative historical and contemporary analysis of three complex cases of federalism; an examination of policy formation by subnational governments in several distinct arenas; a consideration of both the ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ dimensions of decentralisation and their effect on governance; and a review of the changing character of civil society in all three countries.

Chapter 1 posits a series of questions intended to guide each substantive chapter, offers a justification for case selection and defines key terms. Core to the analysis is the question: ‘How have the efficacy of subnational policy making and its capacity to address issues and concerns of the “moral commonwealth” been affected by decentralization and changes in democratic practice?’ (p. 5). Efficacy encompasses ‘effectiveness, appropriateness and efficiency’, while ‘the moral commonwealth’ refers to the normative idea that governments should work for the common good as determined by democratic processes (p. 5). The authors do not indicate how they will measure efficacy or how they will determine what constitutes the common good in each of the cases under study. Given the importance of these concepts to the book’s core question, its failure to address these methodological issues is disappointing.

Each of the four substantive chapters engages a specific aspect of decentralisation, subnational governance or civil society. Chapter 2 offers a sweeping history of centralisation, decentralisation and recentralisation of government power in the three countries, beginning with colonialism. This account, while a useful survey, neither breaks new empirical ground nor orients the reader with any crisply stated hypotheses. The chapter’s conclusion offers some striking observations. For example, the authors argue that ‘the institutionalisation of federalism is closely tied to the fate of democratic initiatives’ (p. 84), and that the uninterrupted history of democracy in the United States accounts for its high level of decentralisation.

Chapter 3 evaluates how changes in democratic practice and decentralisation affect power sharing among separate branches of government and the performance of subnational governments in terms of improving administrative capability and opportunities for citizen participation. The chapter covers several recent shifts in the distribution of power among branches of government in the three countries. Though it mentions a few prominent examples, such as participatory budgeting in Brazil, the chapter provides limited information about advances in administrative modernisation or openness to citizen participation. Moreover, the authors miss a terrific opportunity to explore how increasing power in the hands of national legislatures and courts can either enhance or undermine the performance of subnational governments.

All three federal systems have experienced, to varying degrees, a decentralisation of administrative responsibilities and fiscal revenues. At the same time, national and

subnational governments share responsibilities for making and implementing policies in most areas. The authors of Chapter 4 discuss how the resulting tensions in intergovernmental relations can lead to conflict, collaboration or innovation. Unfortunately, in the absence of a well-articulated framework, the authors cannot take full advantage of their rich empirical observations.

Chapter 5 documents the rise of civil society in the three countries. Its extensive survey of interest groups, movements and political parties draws attention to how activated or deactivated civil society has become. No doubt many readers will find this general survey both interesting and informative, but the material covered in this chapter seems orthogonal to the rest of the text. We learn very little about what demands these groups have placed on subnational governments, the access they have enjoyed to elected officials or the responses they have received. It is not obvious that the still weak (though perhaps growing) influence of civil society on governments in Mexico and Brazil warrants an entire chapter. The concluding chapter reviews the tensions that have arisen from decentralisation (and sometimes recentralisation) and the way in which these have played out in the three countries. It also revisits the question of the changing capacities of subnational governments in the face of new challenges. The chapter's final section considers how federalism might evolve in several different directions in the future.

Governance in the Americas offers a broad overview of decentralisation and democratisation in Mexico, Brazil and the United States. While the book raises compelling research questions and provides extensive empirical coverage, the provision of a clearly specified theoretical framework would have greatly increased its value as a work in comparative policy analysis and its contribution to larger debates about the causes and consequences of decentralisation under federalism.

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Michelle A. Saint-Germain and Cynthia Chaves Metoyer, *Women Legislators in Central America: Politics, Democracy and Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. viii + 338, \$65.00, \$27.95 pb.

This book is a detailed study of women legislators in Central America. According to the authors, the book does three things: first, it is a descriptive study of women elected to the national legislatures between 1980 and 1995. Second, it is a comparative study of women elected in five countries in one region: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua; and, finally, it is an analysis of the contributions of elected women to public policy and to the democratisation movements of that era. Taking the increase in the numbers of women elected during the 1980s and 1990s as their starting point, Saint-Germain and Metoyer seek to explore why these increases occurred, which women were elected, the political roles that they played and any changes in public policy they brought about, as well as examining the role of women in the processes of democratisation that were also taking place in the region at that time. The authors base their analysis on a range of data. Foremost are data derived from a vast number of interviews (more than 100) conducted with women legislators between 1984 and 1995, supplemented with other primary and secondary data. As such the book fills a gap in our knowledge. As far as