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Kathleen O'Neill, *Decentralizing the State: Elections, Parties and Local Power in the Andes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 286, £40.00, £ 14.99 pb.

Kathleen O'Neill's insightful and detailed study of decentralisation in the Andean region aims to explain why political parties embarked on what has been one of the most popular institutional reforms of recent times in the developing world. The book's main argument posits that political parties of strong centralised governments choose rationally to decentralise in the face of the uncertainty of retaining the executive in the future and the possibility of gaining power at the level to which power is distributed.

The first part of the book presents a theoretical discussion on decentralisation and a model to test the main hypothesis based on logistic regressions. The second part contains in-depth country studies for Colombia and Bolivia and somewhat less in-depth analyses for Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. The empirical quantitative evidence that nourishes the model comes from data from these five Andean nations and from the Polity II data set. The qualitative information provided is based mainly on several of O'Neill's interviews with key informants. In Part III, comparisons are made among the cases and overall conclusions are drafted. In addition, she presents a short extension of her thesis to other countries.

O'Neill's central hypothesis seems plausible. However, although she tests and briefly mentions other reasons that help to explain why political parties embraced decentralisation, some other potential ideas are omitted, leaving the reader with the sensation that decentralisation is merely the result of political party intervention. Yet there are many other political, economic and social reasons that can also help to explain countries' decisions to adopt this institutional reform. Another limitation of the study, familiar to social scientists working in the developing world, is the lack of availability and inconsistency of data, which makes the comparison within countries particularly challenging. In this aspect, O'Neill's seamstress work is commendable, stitching dissimilar fabrics of socio-political information from different countries and adding valid theoretical patches to present a wearable suit that fits the countries analysed (and potentially other countries in other scenarios).

O'Neill's conclusions confirm the initial hypothesis that decentralisation happened when dominant political parties in power had strong local support but weak national backing. Regarding the particular cases, Bolivia and Colombia fit the model well because these countries decentralised (both extensively) at a time of weak national support for the party in power and strong support at the local level. Results for Ecuador are less significant, partly because of political parties' wide swings between elections and limited advances in decentralisation. O'Neill indicated the limited success of decentralisation, arguing that the country was in fact an example of 're-centralisation', something possible only with a strong authoritarian regime such as the second presidency of Alberto Fujimori. Finally, Venezuela shows weak results, partly explained by a late and timid decentralisation and the uncertainty faced by political parties.

Finally O'Neill reflects on the applicability of her model for Argentina, Chile and Mexico. For Argentina, she argues that decentralisation was also the result of political pressures; first from the Peronists while in opposition and later by President Menem via discretional inter-governmental transfers. In Chile, decentralisation manifested first as fiscal reforms during the Pinochet era and later as political

changes promoted by President Aylwin. In Mexico, decentralisation was the result of political changes made from the top by the dominant hegemonic PRI party, following the same political expectations of gaining higher local support by relinquishing some power at the centre.

O'Neill has provided us with an accessible and innovative comparative analysis of decentralisation in the region which will complement existing individual country studies examining this process.

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Michael Taussig, *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. xiii + 208, $15.00, pb.

William Avilés, *Global Capitalism, Democracy and Civil-Military Relations in Colombia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. x + 192, $60.00, hb.

These two new contributions to the English language literature on Colombia offer very distinct angles on the paramilitary problem of that country. Taussig's is a micro level view, a diary of this distinguished anthropologist's two weeks in a town he had first visited in 1969 and which by 2001, the year of this return, is in the midst of a paramilitary *limpieza*, literally a cleansing of 'undesirables', the beggars, delinquents, dissidents to their authority and of course, anyone remotely suspected of sympathies with the guerillas. The second offers a macro level political economy of the paramilitary-military-civilian nexus in Colombia. Together both books offer yet more evidence of the complex and insidious ways the armed right have over the last two decades penetrated into the everyday life of many parts of Colombia. But in addition, they indicate how this penetration has been aided and abetted not just by traditional agrarian elites in the defence of their lives and property, but by the most modern and transnational of technocratic elites.

The latter, as Aviles demonstrates, have held key positions in all recent governments; indeed he traces the educational background and transnational relations of the key ministers of the four presidential administrations between 1990 and 2006 (Gaviria, Samper, Pastrana and Uribe). The Universities of Los Andes, Oxford, Harvard, MIT, together with the IMF, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, all figure prominently in the cvs on display. Uribe's is arguably the only presidency which represents traditional agrarian as well as technocratic and transnational elites; but the evidence of serious dispute between them is not very apparent, a topic that Aviles could have explored in greater depth.

The commitment of these presidencies to neoliberal adjustment and global competitiveness is a common thread, as is their anti-paramilitary rhetoric and initiatives as well as their failure to translate these into any serious state control over groups dedicated to brutality and terror in their war against Colombia's guerillas. Colombia's guerillas are also responsible for atrocities, although no human rights monitoring puts this on the same scale as those perpetrated by the armed right. What is important about Aviles' book is that it is not a crude account of direct collusion by elites in the rise of the paramilitary right. There is some of this, in the form of well known data on drugs, landowning and army funding and support. Yet it is more focused on the failure of the most globalised elites to implement initiatives