

1998

Democracy and Its Discontents: Development, Interdependence, and U.S. Policy in Latin America

Mark R. Amstuz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Amstuz, Mark R. (1998) "Democracy and Its Discontents: Development, Interdependence, and U.S. Policy in Latin America," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 51 : No. 3 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol51/iss3/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

146 Naval War College Review

the context of the threat it poses to democracy in the hemisphere.

The importance of the ideas in this work is abundant. For years the United States has paid little more than lip service to the cause of democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean. History shows no room for doubt that U.S. intervention in the region has been problematic in the political realm, and often disruptive to social forces struggling to find expression for their interest in democracy within the countries that received U.S. "help." Yet *Beyond Sovereignty* demonstrates that in this hemisphere, effective regional cohesion around the idea of democracy has never been more powerful than it is now. In a world in which regional forces are shaping the future, the United States must devise policies to promote this positive force for democracy in its own geopolitical neighborhood.

CHARLES T. EPPRIGHT
Arlington, Virginia

Wiarda, Howard J. *Democracy and Its Discontents: Development, Interdependence, and U.S. Policy in Latin America*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. 367pp. \$27.95

Two major approaches dominate comparative politics research—a universalistic, scientific approach that emphasizes similarities and regularities among the world's political systems, and a more traditional "area studies" perspective that emphasizes distinctive features of different geographical areas. The first approach (deeply influenced by the so-called rational choice or public choice

theory) seeks to develop social-scientific theories and hypotheses that can be empirically tested and verified. Traditional area studies, by contrast, seek to explain the behavior of political actors and governmental institutions based on the history, religious values, cultural traditions, and the social and economic structures of a particular region. For area studies specialists, understanding the politics of developing nations, especially non-Western states, is impossible without first studying their language, culture, and history.

Howard Wiarda, a political science professor affiliated with the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, is a scholar of the traditional area studies school. Long regarded as a leading specialist on Latin America, Wiarda has written extensively and incisively on the politics and government of the Western Hemisphere, as well as on U.S.-Latin American relations. The book under review is a wide-ranging collection of previously published essays covering key issues in contemporary Latin American politics and relations with the United States. Some of the important themes discussed are legal and political traditions, the notion of the state, political reform, democratization, human rights, and U.S.-Caribbean relations.

As a traditional area-specialist, Wiarda writes that to understand Latin America's struggle for democracy "one has to go back to history." For him, this means understanding the region's distinctive traditions, social values, and cultural norms that have evolved since the Spanish conquest. Wiarda argues that Latin America's tradition of a strong

state is rooted in hierarchical, elitist, and corporatistic values derived from the sixteenth-century tradition of neo-scholasticism. More specifically, he asserts that since the Latin American democratic traditions have been based on Thomistic and Rousseauian ideals, the region's constitutional practices have resulted in centralized, organic, and corporatistic structures designed to carry out "the great and glorious ends of government." By contrast, the North American constitutional norms have been based on Lockean, Madisonian, and Jeffersonian principles that have fostered radically different governmental structures based on consent, majority rule, separation of powers, and checks and balances. Wiarda observes that while the North American emphasis on process and constitutional procedures has resulted in pragmatic, prosaic decision making, the U.S. regime has been stable and durable. But the failure of Latin American regimes to give sufficient attention to constitutional decision-making procedures has led to more rigid and fragile regimes.

Wiarda argues that U.S. policy of trying to replicate in Latin America Westminster-style democratic practice has been misguided and ineffective, reflecting at best a limited understanding of the region's history and traditions, or at worst a profound hostility to it. While he correctly questions the wisdom of implementing policies that superimpose values and traditions on foreign countries, Wiarda's analysis would have been more credible had he outlined strategies that would advance the consolidation of Latin American democracy without neglecting the region's distinctive cultural

and historical traditions. If U.S. insistence on competitive elections is not the only road to democratic government, how should the United States attempt to encourage and sustain the consolidation of democratic systems? We can agree with Wiarda that U.S. policy makers need to be informed about the region's values, traditions, and cultural norms, and to pursue U.S. interests with sensitivity and nuance. But having recognized the need for an informed and sensitive policy, the challenge for U.S. officials is how to advance democratic ideals and practices even when such ideals may conflict with regional cultural sensitivities.

"Latin America," writes Wiarda, "has a system of politics that, in many ways, is uniquely its own." Persons wishing to become more familiar with some of the distinctive features of the region's politics will find many of the book's essays stimulating and worthwhile, providing penetrating assessments and critiques on important domestic and Western Hemispheric issues. While readers may differ with Wiarda's judgments and policy conclusions, they will find his analysis informed and his scholarship sound.

MARK R. AMSTUTZ
Wheaton College

Baldwin, Sherman. *Ironclaw*. New York: William Morrow, 1996. 265pp. \$24

Sherman Baldwin touches the elephant and describes it. But unlike the people in the famous fable, he is not blind. Nor is the item described as small or as