

Book Reviews

Close, David, Martí i Puig, Salvador and McConnell, Shelly A. (eds.) (2012) *The Sandinistas and Nicaragua since 1979*, Lynne Reinner (Boulder, CO and London), + 365 pp. £61.95 hbk.

This edited volume has a number of important merits. First, it brings Nicaragua back into focus again after years of comparative neglect. Second, it places the Sandinistas at the centre of the study, wisely figuring that the history of Nicaragua since 1979 is the history of the Sandinistas, and that one cannot be understood without the other. Third, it provides detailed and informative chapters on a wide range of issues, including the nature of *sandinismo*, opposition to the Sandinistas, the judiciary, the electoral system, ethnic minorities and the autonomous regions, poverty, land reform and agriculture, international solidarity, and so on, competently and comprehensively bringing the reader up to date with the principal policy trends in these areas over the last 30-odd years.

The most outstanding chapters are those by Andrés Pérez Boltodano on Nicaraguan political culture and Karen Kampwirth on feminism. Pérez Boltodano, with lyrical eloquence, describes how the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN; Sandinista National Liberation Front) abandoned the dream of ‘national sovereignty, social justice, and popular democracy’ for a crude pragmatism, exercised ‘within the traditional Nicaraguan political morality and the rules of the game set by neoliberal economics’ (p. 85). Kampwirth’s chapter reinforces that view, this time from the specific perspective of gender politics, using the Sandinistas’ historic 2006 parliamentary vote supporting criminalisation of therapeutic abortion as the prism through which to view the wider dynamic dissected by Pérez Boltodano. Both chapters are penetrating in their insights into this great shift in the FSLN’s worldview, away from revolution and towards pragmatism, and its wider meanings for Nicaraguan politics and society.

Yet both chapters succeed precisely because they provide what the volume fails to give as a whole. Whereas these chapters draw out the ideological background to the changes in the FSLN and in Nicaragua more generally, linking these to wider, global ideological struggles, the volume in general fails to deliver this. To my mind, its principal flaw is that the editors fail to explicitly set out an overarching theoretical framework that could conceptually bind the volume together. Yet *implicitly* the book does seem to be loosely guided by an undeclared, liberal framework, as evidenced, for example, in the chapters on the judiciary and the electoral process (by Elena Martínez Barahona and Shelley McConnell respectively), with their references to ‘democratic consolidation’ – meaning in effect polyarchy – and in the closing chapter by Close and Martí i Puig, with its overwhelming concentration on the influence of the country’s specific institutionality as a means to explain its current situation.

This implicit liberal focus has two severe drawbacks for the volume. First, as this theoretical framework is never formally set out, the reader is left confused as to how to assess the book’s overall conclusions. It is simply *assumed* that the reader is aware of, and indeed shares, these liberal yardsticks. Second, liberal frameworks on

Book Reviews

specific countries tend to leave implicit their comparative element, which, as a result, can often remain more normative than empirical. Hence, the volume may be about Nicaragua exclusively but *implicitly* it is being compared to democratic norms that are never empirically delineated or exemplified. Again it is simply *assumed* that they exist elsewhere; yet this is, of course, highly contestable. Both these elements undermine greatly the volume's explanatory power.

This narrow liberal and country-specific focus may go some way to explaining glaring thematic absences, most notably Nicaragua's place in the international system. This is a most surprising omission, given the country's inordinate exposure to international interference, most notably from the United States, its huge dependence on international donors and the key role they play in policy making as a result, and the economic, social and political impact of the international drugs trade on the country, all of which would have merited individual chapters. These themes are alluded to but never fully expanded upon, yet all point to the need to contextualise Nicaragua within a wider regional and global framework.

While the main conclusion of the book seems to centre on the damage caused to Nicaragua by the FSLN's great turnaround, from an organisation which sought to transform the country's political culture to one that masters and exemplifies it, the narrow liberal and national focus undermines the book's attempts to explain this development and assess its implications. This is disappointing as, while the book does competently provide an overview of Nicaraguan politics and society since 1979, bringing much needed scholarly attention to the country and the region, these absences and omissions prevent it from becoming a key contribution that could help revitalise broader interest in the country.

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