



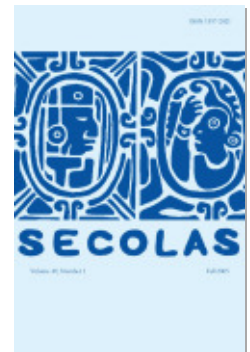
PROJECT MUSE®

Building Democracy in Latin America by John Peeler (review)

Jairo Acuña-Alfaro

The Latin Americanist, Volume 49, Number 1, Fall 2005, pp. 186-188
(Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/706152/summary>

and essays, making them available to the English-speaking reader who likely would not otherwise have access to most of these works. However, this volume is likely to leave the reader with the impression that Costa Rica is not (or is no longer) exceptional, and that its government is no longer able to address a dynamic society's needs during the challenging times of a globalizing economy.

Michelle M. Taylor-Robinson
Department of Political Science
Texas A&M University

***Building Democracy in Latin America.* By John Peeler. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004, p.247, Second Edition, \$22.00.**

"One hundred years ago there were no democracies of any description in Latin America. Fifty years ago there were three. Today almost all countries in the region have liberal democracies. So why are we not celebrating?" (p.188). This statement summarizes and signals the importance of this resourceful and vivid survey by John Peeler on how democracies have struggled and survived in Latin America, besides high levels of inequalities, deficiencies in economic markets, underdevelopment and capitalism. For the author, "a major cause of contemporary difficulties of democracy in Latin America is the tension between coming to terms with the global economy and responding to popular will as expressed in elections, polls and popular mobilization" (p.181). As such, in general terms, Peeler identifies Argentina and Peru as success stories followed by failure; Mexico and Brazil as the mixed blessings of globalization; Bolivia and Ecuador as the failures of globalization and Chile and Costa Rica as the success of globalization.

The book's arguments are structured around bountiful information ranging from the early stages of democracy promotion and establishment, to the intricacies of political party systems, the role of the military and elite groups, social structures, civil society and social movements, neoliberal reforms, populism and globalization. As a consequence, at some point the reader may feel that the connections among themes and chapters are somewhat loose. However, this is perhaps due to the fact that democracy, as Peeler argues, may be viewed not just as a political regime, but the deepening of democracy includes the strengthening of the economic

sphere, as well as the social and cultural mechanism, of developing countries.

Among some of the book's claims, the author maintains that democracy is culturally alien to Latin America (p.25) and that the major barriers to democracy are the persistent and pervasive inequalities, predatory relations between rulers and ruled, and clientelism (p.26). While the latter is unquestionably true, the former is prone to criticism, as democracy is traditionally alien not only to Latin America but also to all advanced industrial democracies. Democracy is a political regime that evolves and adapts over time in contrast to authoritarianism, which is imposed. Indeed, all current democracies were at some point ruled by political regimes that by current standards would not qualify as democratic.

Chapter 3 identifies in accordance with the traditional literature two "waves" of democratization in Latin America. The first running from 1920 through the 1960s involved Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Uruguay and Venezuela. The second wave began in the 1970s and still continues and has seen the establishment of formally democratic regimes in most countries of the region with different transitions and paths. In addition, three stragglers are identified: Cuba, Haiti and Paraguay.

Chapter 4, on the other hand, builds up on Mainwaring and Scully's (1995) work on party systems to identify two different party systems in the region that shape the quality of democracy and its performance. It distinguishes among strongly institutionalized party systems those of Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, Venezuela and Costa Rica (the very same first wave "surfers"), and a second category called "inchoate" party systems, which includes the rest of countries.

Two hypotheses are presented on the survival of democracy. The first is that "Latin Americans (elites and masses) may have actually learned something about how to operate a democratic system, and may have learned that such a system is preferable to any alternatives even if it does not solve the problem" and second, there is an alternative hypothesis that "the maintenance of democratic regimes owes a great deal to the international conjuncture that favors such regimes" (p.165). On the former, the author suggests that El Salvador in the 1990s seems to be a clear example of such political learning, as "political violence has been progressively replaced by electoral competition and the day to day give and take of democracy" (p.165). On the latter hypothesis, the keystone is the policy of the United States, which reinforces the analysis that it is practically impossible to understand democra-

cy's performance and survival in the region without analyzing the role of this hegemon, as well as other multilateral donors.

Chapters 6 and 7 are a slightly disappointing, as the author tries to present and synthesize the state of democracy at the dawn of the 21st century and his vision of democracy in a globalized world. His conclusion seems to indicate that "we ought to favor a deepening of democracy because it is the right thing to do, the just thing to do" (p.189). Perhaps it would have been more valuable and interesting to present an account on why is it that democracy is the right and just thing to do. And more importantly, given the high level of inequality (social, cultural, ethnical and economic), what mechanisms are at the disposal of democratic regimes to cause advances in human development. That is, besides asking, "How have neoliberal economic reforms affected democratic regimes?" (p.139 and 150) it might be indeed much more enlightening to reverse the question and ask how does democracy affects or shapes the implementation of economic reforms. This is perhaps a matter for future scholarship and research if we truly want to understand how we can help build deeper democratic regimes in Latin America.

Last but not least, the author tries to show how liberal democracy has in fact emerged in Latin America, consistent with a perspective on the interaction of structure and human action. This is undoubtedly a daunting task and the complexities involved are difficult to grasp and put together into a coherent framework. However, this book is an interesting introductory account to the comparative politics of democratization, and for sure a worthwhile reading for undergraduate students interested in contemporary politics in Latin America.

Jairo Acuña-Alfaro
Queen Elizabeth House & St. Antony's College
University of Oxford

***From Fanatics to Folk: Brazilian Millenarianism and Popular Culture.* By Patricia R. Pessar. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 273, \$22.95.**

In this cultural *tour de force*, Patricia Pessar elaborates upon findings from her 1976 PhD dissertation on Brazilian millenarianism. Specifically, her treatise centers upon popular mobilization that coalesced around Pedro Batista in rural northeastern Brazil,