

Book Reviews

Brinks, Daniel, Leiras, Marcelo and Mainwaring, Scott (2014) *Reflections on Uneven Democracies: The Legacy of Guillermo O'Donnell*, Johns Hopkins University Press (Baltimore, MA), viii + 422 pp. £45.00 hbk. £22.50 pbk.

This outstanding volume edited by these three pre-eminent scholars pays homage to the legacy of one of the most influential scholars of Latin American and comparative politics of his generation, Guillermo O'Donnell (1936–2011). O'Donnell was the dissertation advisor of both Brinks and Leiras at the University of Notre Dame, while Mainwaring shares with O'Donnell credit for transforming Notre Dame's Kellogg Institute for International Studies into one of the United States' leading centres for the study of democracy in Latin America and the world.

This editorial trio brought together an intellectually and generationally diverse group of talented scholars who simultaneously celebrate O'Donnell's myriad contributions to the study of democracy, authoritarianism and transitions between these two regime types, but also buttress, extend and challenge many of the core theoretical and intellectual contributions made by O'Donnell across the span of his illustrious career. The volume is divided into five principal sections (Democratic Breakdowns, Survival, and Transitions; The Political Economy of Democracy and Authoritarianism; Weak Formal Institutions, Rule of Law, and Delegative Democracy; Human Agency and the Quality of Democracy; Guillermo O'Donnell and the Study of Politics), book-ended by a well-crafted introduction and conclusion by the three editors.

One of the areas of academic inquiry where O'Donnell's impact on the discipline was most powerful is the study of democratic breakdown, survival and transition, the subject of the book's first section. In Chapter 1, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán and Scott Mainwaring analyse the breakdown and survival of Latin America's democratic regimes in the post-World War II era. One of the most important conclusions of this cross-national study, in line with the theory elaborated by O'Donnell (1973) in his seminal work on bureaucratic-authoritarianism, is that there exists no relationship between a country's level of development and the probability of its democratic system breaking down.

In Chapter 2, Carlos Gervasoni examines many of the same issues covered in the preceding chapter, but focuses on the single country that so strongly influenced O'Donnell's scholarship, his native Argentina. Gervasoni concludes his contribution highlighting a realisation O'Donnell had in the early 1990s. That is, that the principal threat to Argentine democracy was no longer a military coup as in the past, but rather the concentration of power in the hands of populist and increasingly authoritarian democratically elected presidents, with President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) the most poignant example of this danger O'Donnell warned of more than twenty years ago.

The first section concludes with an insightful chapter by Philippe Schmitter, O'Donnell's partner (along with Laurence Whitehead, author of Chapter 15) in the

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influential *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule* series. Schmitter posits that while many democracies that transitioned from dictatorship over the past 40 years are unlikely to slide back into authoritarian rule, they will become increasingly contested, as citizens question why there continues to exist such a high level of dissonance between democratic ideals and the actual functioning of their democratic system.

The third section concentrates on theoretical contributions made by O'Donnell during the latter half of his career, when the threat of a military coup overthrowing a democratic government in Latin America was minimal (with a few exceptions), especially compared to the pre-1980 era. In Chapter 8, Tim Power provides a comprehensive overview of O'Donnell's evolving contributions to the understanding of democratic consolidation, from the bureaucratic-authoritarianism of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to the delegative democracy of the past three decades. Pivotal to the concept of delegative democracy is the existence of a weakly institutionalised environment, a point made clear by Enrique Peruzzotti's Chapter 12 on delegative democracy's severe democratic accountability deficit.

In Chapter 10, Steven Levitsky and Victoria Murillo assess the shaky foundations upon which many Latin American democracies rest, and utilise lessons from the Latin American experience to propose some options for bolstering democratic institutions within a context of weak institutionalisation. Finally, in Chapter 11, Lucas González unpacks the broader concept of delegative democracy, and empirically explores the manner in which economic conditions, public opinion and other factors can increase the likelihood of a democracy becoming a delegative democracy instead of a representative democracy.

*Reflections on Uneven Democracies* honours and extends the profound intellectual contributions of Guillermo O'Donnell to the discipline/*La Academia*. It is a book that an extremely diverse range of scholars will find of great interest, whether their interests lie in the transition, consolidation and survival of democratic and authoritarian regimes, in the quality and performance of democracies and dictatorships, or in the functioning of political institutions within democratic regimes.

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## Reference

O'Donnell, G. (1973) *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics*. University of California: Berkeley.