

FOCUS: Politics, Societies & Cultures in Contemporary Central America

Luis Roniger (2011)

Transnational Politics in Central America

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Luis Roniger's *Transnational Politics in Central America* seeks to insert Central America into the transnationalism debate. According to Roniger, the concept of transnationalism is linked to the meaning of globalization. The author understands globalization merely in economic terms (7). But the concept of transnationalism or transnational politics transcends globalization, as it refers to broader phenomena of political, cultural, and social processes of interaction, communication, and movement across nations (7). Roniger understands transnationalization as a reciprocal process leading on the one hand to increased homogenization and on the other hand to "counter-hegemonic" processes (7). Accordingly, transnationalism would comprise interactions, decisions, and practices by various (state and non-state) actors with intentional or accidental cross-national effects. Roniger's book is another contribution to the vast scientific literature about global processes, transnationalism, and entanglements. The author stresses two rather important – and in the academic debate increasingly relevant – arguments. Firstly, the historical embeddedness of

transnational politics in Central America reveals the contradictions of the mainstream argument which sees transnationalism (and globalism) as a recent phenomenon. In this light, Roniger refers to the "discourse of newness," where the recent focus on globalization (and transnationalization) is put into question by historical contextualizations (Middell/Naumann 2010). Secondly, the author puts forward Central America as a "textbook case" for the analysis of transnational politics, which has been – until now – an underexplored field of analysis (one exception being Robinson 2003).

Highlighting the historical embeddedness of Central America's transnational politics is the outstanding feature of this book. It is unique because Central America has a long tradition and history of cross-national (regional) interaction on various levels, among different actors and of varying intensity. Moreover, Roniger claims "... that this transnational dimension has been present in the region since the early times and most clearly since the colonial period, affecting political and social processes at the national level" (2). The author tries to present a comprehensive and extensive

overview of the historical developments in Central America by simultaneously retracing interactions and processes across Central American countries, as well as within them.

The decisive argument for Roniger is the historical legacy and embeddedness of transnational politics in Central America. According to him, processes of region-making and region-dismantling by different internal actors (e.g., national elites, non-state actors) and external ones (notably the USA) fueled and blocked the move towards transnationalism (185) throughout two centuries (chapter 1). The argumentation of the book proceeds along an historical timeline. Following this general timeline, thematic issues are elaborated in terms of their transnational predisposition. The historical facts and issues he presents about Central America are not new, but Roniger reads and interprets them through his transnationalist lens.

According to the author, transnational politics and their counter-moves unfold in three ways in Central America, which are not mutually exclusive. First, the (often failed) attempts at the construction of one Central American political, economic, and cultural entity are elaborated, stretching from the colonial Captaincy General of Guatemala via the short-lived Federal Republic of Central America (1821-1848) (31) until the 1920s (chapters 2, 7 & 8). Second, the simultaneous and counter-transnational move toward a political, economic, and social differentiation has led to the balkanization of Central America into five nation-states (chapters 3-7). Third, the historically-chosen

development paths within the five countries eventually contributed to the political and socio-economic imbalances culminating in the civil wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (chapters 9, 11). Even though the idea of a political unification of Central America came to an end, specific challenges and influences by external actors (USA) and internal state and non-state actors in one Central American country had and continue to have impacts on the whole region. After civil wars and peace-building processes, new challenges are inter alia migration, violence, and organized crime (117).

Overall, Roniger's selection of the relevant historic issues is well chosen and it reflects his goal to survey Central America over the last 200 years. However, it becomes obvious that his aim of "squeezing" 200 years into 190 pages is somewhat ambitious. At some points, the chronological argumentation obscures more than it reveals. Although Roniger tries to present a differentiated and complete view of the various (counter-) transnational moves of different actors in the Isthmus, some decisive actors of Central American history are underexplored in the book. For instance, the role of the military in some countries - especially Guatemala - in state-building and as a major factor of power was largely neglected. It would have been interesting for readers to learn more about the role of the military from a transnational perspective.

Moreover, the role of elite power in Central America is an issue which deserves more attention; especially a transnational disclosure of how oligarchies have adapted and changed their economic and political

ideas, discourses, and practices in relation to their respective challenges. Roniger refers to the role of the national elites in various thematic issues, but falls short to expound more on the historical legacy of this particular group of actors.

Upon closer examination, each chapter follows a thematic and a chronological structure of argumentation. Usually, individual chapters are quite well-elaborated. However, very often the links and connections between the thematic chapters are obscured by the chronological argumentation, thereby suggesting that some issues only played a role for transnational politics at one specific point in time. For instance, Roniger rightly points out that Central America has been facing great challenges of crime, violence and migration since the 1990s. However, he overlooks that migration is by no means only a recent phenomenon. Instead, it can also be traced back to the “long 19th century” when Central America witnessed a huge influx of migrants, now forming a significant part of the oligarchy and other parts of the population. Moreover, the role migrants play nowadays in Central American politics and economies (e.g., home town associations and remittances) should have received more attention. Especially the question how the Central American elite is trying to extend and sustain migration flows and links to the USA (as a paradigmatic transnational policy) is of particularly interest here.

The same critique applies to the analytical relevance of Central America as a region. Even though Roniger dedicates an entire chapter to this issue and elaborates on the geographic, topographic, and demographic

similarities of Central America as a region, he remains silent on the actual region-making and region-dismantling throughout his whole argumentation. Unfortunately, hardly any references are made to how the understanding of the region has changed or even continues to change due to the very discursive practices, identities, and cultural entanglements, which Roniger uses as explanatory mechanisms.

Roniger’s contribution might serve as a useful entry point for students, as well as a general audience with a beginning interest in Central American politics. It gives the reader a sense of the richness of an historical Central American perspective on transnational politics, but simultaneously frustrates the Central American expert, because the richness is only hinted at, not fully explored.

Bibliography

- Middell, Matthias and Katja Naumann (2010): *Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization*. *Journal of Global History* 5 (1), 149-170.
- Robinson, William I. (2003): *Transnational Conflicts, Central America, Social Change, and Globalization*. London, New York: Verso.