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Politics, Societies and Cultures in Contemporary Central America

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As guest editors of CROLAR, we are pleased to present to you the issue “Politics, Societies, and Cultures in Contemporary Central America.” While CROLAR’s first issues have focused on thematic fields such as inequalities or resistance and social movements, the current issue takes an interdisciplinary look at a region. Compared to its immediate neighbors Mexico and Colombia, Central America is composed of countries that might be small in territorial terms; nevertheless, the region is highly complex and fragmented, as well as a multicultural, dynamic and simultaneously connected area in today’s globalized world.

The societies and states of the Central American sub-continent are historically, politically, and culturally intertwined. To capture the contemporary socio-political realities and the local, national, and transnational imaginaries and identities, we have to consider the interdependencies that have shaped the region since colonial times. Therefore, adopting a diachronic perspective is fundamental to engaging in any critical reflection about Central America as a diverse unit. This is especially so considering its

colonial past and subsequent developments that kept transforming the political scenarios of the region. Consider, for example, the early experience of a failed union, anti-imperialist and revolutionary movements, civil wars, the developments of democratization and their links to neoliberalism, as well as the continent’s transnational communities resulting of diverse exiles, migrations, displacements, and diasporas.

Nevertheless, to date, Central America remains an under-researched and marginal region in the Social Sciences and Humanities – an exception being discussions of Central America in academic debates interested in the past civil wars, memory-discourses, violence, and social fragmentation. Without negating the region’s grave security problems, the Isthmus is more than “Uncle Sam’s dirty backyard” inhabited by communist guerrillas, marauding youth gangs or corrupt drug traffickers. For example, transnational dynamics have interwoven and transformed Central American peoples and societies – especially over the last 30 years – and today stand paradigmatically for a configuration of the globalized world in and from the South.

This issue aims at showcasing the rich and diverse contemporary academic production from and about Central America. To this end, it focuses on reviews of academic productions that critically deal with the contemporary political, social, and cultural realities in Central America from different disciplinary perspectives, such as Anthropology, Economics, History, Political Science or Sociology.

Studying Central America allows us to take a closer look at ongoing processes of global capitalism and geopolitical interests, but also at narratives and imaginaries of globalization and anti-colonialism, which are reflected and condensed in Central America's intertwined histories – perhaps more so than in any other Latin American region today. This becomes obvious in reviews of monographs focusing on transnational politics in Central America and the common features of politics in modern Central America. The region remains a real, but also a symbolic battleground where struggles for (gender) equality, justice, inclusion, natural resources, and conviviality are taking place. One battleground is the City, as shown by a review on an edited volume dealing with urban spaces; other battlegrounds are the memories of violence and conflicts, and postwar reconstruction, as evidenced in reviews of books covering historical and sociological accounts to memoria and anthropological views on indigenous governance in postwar-Guatemala.

In the “Focus” section, special emphasis is put on topics that transcend the national context

and which instead focus on transnational dynamics, their complex interrelations and interdependencies with the local and national level. These transnationalized local developments are especially represented in reviews focusing on security issues – such as the Central American youth gangs or maras and the privatization of security – or economic and fiscal questions – such as the Central American tax regimes and the remittances of migrants sent to their home countries.

The reviews of the section “Interventions” take a closer look at the opportunities and limitations of journalism in Central America. On the one hand, a new and promising form of (investigative) journalism is currently rising fast and receiving growing attention: the *crónica*. On the other hand, the section features reviews discussing the problems or dangers inherent in journalistic approaches to the Mexican and Central American “War on Drugs”.

We decided to dedicate the section “Classics Revisited” to the person who, probably like no other intellectual of the second half of the 20th century, can be called a genuine Central American: Dr. Edelberto Torres-Rivas. With his brilliant political, sociological, and historical studies, Torres-Rivas contributed not only to the understanding, but also to the formation of Central American critical thought itself. Three reviews in the aforementioned section trace his legacy from very different disciplinary approaches and points of view, emphasizing some of his ground-breaking publications, such as the award-winning book “Revoluciones sin

cambios revolucionarios”, but also offering a critical perspective on some of his positions and theoretical-methodological proposals.

Given the geostrategic importance of the Isthmus as a connecting natural, cultural, and economic corridor between North and South, Atlantic and Pacific, assuming a transareal perspective is indispensable to globally situate the shared histories of the region. Against this backdrop, the two reviewed books of the section “Current Debates” treat transnational drug trafficking and corruption, as well as the Cold War in Latin America – topics whose consequences can be studied in detail in Central America and which allow us to embed the region in a broader global and geopolitical setting.

Our cover deserves a special mention, showing a wonderful piece from the series called “Mejen-Go 2004-2011” by renowned Costa Rican artist Joaquín Rodríguez del Paso. As part of a series of 3D-projects he developed during the first decade of the 21st century, he represents Central America’s territory in the form of a foosball table. However, in contrast to a regular soccer field, this one is an asymmetric labyrinth that evokes and plays with the real, but also symbolic battleground condition and disputed image of the Isthmus. Struggle, confrontation, limitations, but also play, dynamism, collectivity, and feelings of belonging shape the Isthmus’ history, peoples, and cultures. We sincerely thank Joaquín Rodríguez del Paso for his permission to feature one of the pieces on the cover of this CROLAR issue.

We hope to have raised your interest in such diverse aspects as the politics, societies, and cultures of contemporary Central America and wish you an inspiring read.