

Institutionalized Pan-Americanism: The Organization of American States

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Herz, Mônica (2011) *The Organization of American States (OAS): Global Governance Away from the Media*, London: Routledge, 138 pages, 978-0-415-49850-0: £19.99 (paperback), 978-0-415-49849-4: £90.00 (hardback).

Latin America and the Western Hemisphere have witnessed numerous attempts of institutionalized regional integration, particularly throughout the twentieth century. In a nutshell, there has been a competition between a) Pan-American or inter-American cooperation, including North, South, and Central America, as well as later the Caribbean, and b) South or Latin American integration, excluding above all the U.S. in order to achieve some autonomy from the mighty northern neighbor. The Organization of American States (OAS) is the institutional expression of inter-American cooperation, but at the same time it has occasionally served as an arena where the tensions between the U.S. and Latin American states became visible.

Mônica Herz, an associate professor at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, has now published a small monograph on the OAS. It describes the organization's history, its functioning, the corresponding "contribution to global and regional governance," and also endeavors to offer an analysis of "international relations in the Western Hemisphere" (p. 3). The book starts with a very short introduction. The first chapter reviews briefly the organization's history and chapters two and three analyze the subjects of security and democracy (the "democratic paradigm"). The fourth chapter addresses the OAS, or better yet, the inter-American system, as "plural architecture for governance," followed by a conclusion, and a selected bibliography.

While the introduction nicely underlines the importance of the historical context for the understanding of the OAS' role today (p. 4), the periodization is somewhat conventional: during (1948–1989) and after the East–West conflict (1989 sq.) (p. 5). One may ask whether this categorization is a little myopic and, in the hemispheric context, too centered on the East–West confrontation. From an institutional perspective, 1970 (organizational reform) may equally represent a turning point, as well as the end of the dictatorships in the Southern Cone prior to the conclusion of the East–West "proxy wars" in Central America.

The historical part includes an inter-American and global perspective (though more through an East–West than a North–South prism), but—also due to the scope of a brief introductory book—tends to neglect intra-Latin American dynamics (social developments, reaction to dictatorships, and civil wars in the region) and U.S. domestic and foreign policy shifts. One paramount question seems not to be addressed satisfactorily: Why was the OAS established at all, and was it a continuation of the previous inter-American conferences or something new? Throughout the book, the "Cold War" prism is perhaps too dominant. Even though the East–West conflict was a determining force, it was also complemented by a particular inter-American element of the North–South dispute, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. In this respect, one may ask: Was the U.S. antagonism toward communist Cuba (whose government was excluded from participating in the OAS in 1962) an East–West problem or did it also display a North–South clash? Moreover, scandals and the perceptions from different American societies could have been worth mentioning to help understanding of the OAS' nature while also making reading more entertaining; for example, at some point in the 1970s/1980s, the OAS headquarters in Washington was considered a money-wasting party hall. In accordance,

there were proposals to abolish the OAS in general, move its seat to a southern member state, or turn it into a Latin American organization. At the same time, discontent with the OAS in the U.S. grew and the request to withdraw from it emerged. And so, how did this affect the collective memory of the organization?

In contrast to the period until 1990, the developments since the 1990s are tidily described: The OAS became less U.S.-dominated and tried to act like a mediator for several regional trade agreements.

The “security” chapter offers a lot of information, but could have done better to provide the bigger picture. It succeeds in describing the transfer from civil wars and interstate wars affected by the East–West conflict to new areas such as drug-trafficking or terrorism and, more recently, also includes transnational crime, post-conflict peace building, and human security (p. 57). Beyond describing many programs and initiatives as well as the corresponding institutions and units, this chapter could also have addressed the very nature of the OAS as a security organization: How has the concept of security changed over time?

The chapter on the “democratic paradigm” neatly summarizes the process of democracy promotion in the inter-American system, particularly after 1990, including, for example, the Santiago resolution in 1991, the Inter-American Democratic Charter of 2001, the Department for the Promotion of Democracy, and the (successful) electoral monitoring. In her chapter conclusion, Herz provides a quite thoughtful and balanced summary. While the rule of law continues to be the topic of “gravest deficiency,” social inequality and exclusion have certainly led to widespread “popular disillusionment with democracy” (pp. 73, 74). The book stresses two problems: limitations of the concept of democracy and the organization’s difficulty in dealing with authoritarian regression.

The concern with the administration of the process aiming at the maintenance of order is in an example of the rationalizing role of an international organization that reaches for Western models of governance. The practice of the OAS in this sphere can be seen as part of a much broader history of encounters between Western and Latin American societies that has led to one of the crucial intellectual debates in the region about these tense and creative encounters and the process of modernization (p. 75).

The last part bears the title “Working within a plural architecture for governance” and addresses other regional arenas of global (or regional) governance with particular regard to security and democracy (p. 77). Here, the author 1) discusses several regional definitions and regional identities, 2) asks how some of these institutions contribute to global governance in terms of security, and 3) analyzes how these institutions perform in democracy matters. The book focuses on four forums: the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Andean Community, the Common South American Market (Mercosur), and the Rio Group. It would have been interesting to compare these four with the Bolivarian ALBA, as a contrasting example, particularly as the book seemingly identifies some ALBA countries to be on the road to a “collision course”—Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua (p. 87). In this interesting chapter, Herz discusses the identities related to the concepts of Western Hemisphere/the Americas, Hispanoamerica, and Latin America (p. 78), where she focuses in particular on institutions such as the UN Economic Commission for Latin America, the Caribbean (ECLAC), and other regional integration bodies which discussed Latin America’s role in the world. The fact that both the historical concepts of Pan-Americanism, Hispanic America, or Latin America as well as the twentieth century integration efforts based largely on identity debates of the elites, remains unaddressed.¹ Furthermore, the Rio Group, which brought together the Contadora Group and its supporters in 1989 (aiming at a negotiated solution to the Central American conflicts), is hardly discussed as a Latin American reaction to the OAS’ reluctance, unwillingness, or incapacity to mediate in the civil wars of Central America. This cooperation among Latin American states somewhat attested the OAS

1. See Eduardo Devés Valdés, *El Pensamiento Latinoamericano En El Siglo XX: Entre la Modernización y la Identidad* (Colección Historias Americanas), Editorial Biblos 2003.

untrustworthiness. In contrast to other regional organizations that refer more generally to democratic rules, the OAS clearly strengthens representative democracy (emphasis on “constitutional continuity”) (p. 87). Nevertheless, Herz also identifies different concepts of democracy in the hemisphere (p. 90). She summarizes

the various institutions with different regional bases presented in this chapter are a relevant part of governance mechanisms available in the Western Hemisphere. In the two areas under scrutiny here they both reinforce the contributions of the OAS to global governance and create alternative venues that can deal with issues the hemispheric organization cannot tackle (p. 89).

Herz concludes her book with the statement that the OAS, contrary to most analyses, actually does play an important role with regard to global governance (p. 91). Its relevance is emphasized in two areas in particular: “as a site for the administration and coordination of interests of states and other actors, diminishing transaction costs and generating predictability, and as a part of a global project of technological ordering” (p. 91). The organization constructs and distributes norms and serves as a meeting point for the North–South dialogue (p. 92).

Even though the aim of the book to provide merely a brief introduction certainly limits its scope, it could provide more details about the different concepts of democracy in the hemisphere or competing identities. A better revision of the language would have been desirable. All in all, this is an interesting contribution for newcomers to the study of regional and global governance in the Western Hemisphere and the OAS in particular. Scholars who are more interested in the historical dimension of inter-American relations and more critical accounts should probably look elsewhere.