

Book Review/Reseña

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Aviva Chomsky. *Central America's Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2021.

Reminding readers of the United States' legacy in Central America, *Central America's Forgotten History* by Aviva Chomsky shows clear causal links between US policies and the recent surge in migration from three countries in the region. Chomsky weaves together parsimonious, yet insightful, lessons in history, international relations, and comparative politics. The book proves valuable for a variety of audiences, from novices looking for a concise history lesson to seasoned scholars seeking to connect multidisciplinary scholarship on Central America.

Chomsky's main argument is that the current migration flows from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are motivated by the deteriorating social conditions that in turn stem from US influence. A century of US-sponsored programs for state-building, national security, and economic policy have left many Central Americans with few economic opportunities, high levels of violence, and political systems incapable of solving social problems.

During the Cold War, the United States provided loans and market access to the Central American elite to create or modernize export sectors that alienated populations from land and economic prospects. The resulting social movements and insurgencies became targets of the armed forces, trained and funded by the United States government. With the end of civil wars in the 1990s, elites embraced US-promoted neoliberal policies that further impoverished the majority yet remain irreversible under the pressures of lending conditions and the dearth of articulated alternatives. The lack of land, opportunity, and personal security generated migration that was at first internal or to nearby countries like Mexico and Costa Rica. As conditions worsened, migrants pushed further north in the desperation seen in caravans and the use of *coyotes*.

Chomsky's brief yet full history of Central America develops the argument to show the collaborations between Central American elite interests and US policies. The first three chapters construct the region's history from the Conquest through the Cold

War. Liberal-era modernization and the growth of state repression pressed Indigenous land and labor into the coffee industry and its successor sectors: cotton, cattle, cocaine transshipment, and carbon-based extraction of petroleum and minerals, among others. Peasant expansion of the agricultural frontier proved the profitability of new lands, the best of which were seized by export agriculture.

Profit and conflict attracted the attention of US policymakers, expressed in formal actions, such as presidential doctrines and allying for progress, as well as informal—from William Walker’s campaign to Wall Street expectations. Reforms, strikes, and social organization provided a rationale for US-supported militaries in search of an internal enemy. Chapters four through seven chronicle the process in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras. In all four countries, the central contradiction is that “concessions to the poor inevitably threaten those who relied on exploiting them” (77).

US power has focused on security interests and political economy, the two fields of international relations. For the rising hegemon, “Central America represented an extension of the American West” (40) with abundant land fertile for mining or agriculture and a vulnerable Indigenous population targeted for genocide through racist myths. Once the United States embraced its Cold War role as the leader of Western security, it sent matériel and a post-Vietnam counterinsurgency strategy that turned the region into the testing ground of might and influence.

US economic interests replaced security concerns after the Cold War, leading to neoliberal policies and the structural adjustment packages that both ushered in new policies and could later come to their rescue: free trade agreements, privatizations, devaluations, fiscal austerity, business impunity for labor abuse and environmental crimes, and financial deepening to extend the grasp of the financial sector. Chapters nine and ten show how the change in US interests help transform elites in Central America from primary-producing barons to transnational networks focused on finance and the consumer sector, demonstrating the reach of power in International Relations.

Comparative politics weighs heavily yet subtly in Chomsky’s study. Notably, migration flows are highest from the countries that have suffered the most influence from US security and economic policies. By contrast where US influence was defeated (Nicaragua) or skillfully managed (Costa Rica), better economic and political opportunities have encouraged more citizens to stay. Regional differences within countries show the roots of activism in the north and east of El Salvador or the neglect of the autonomous areas in the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. Chomsky deftly identifies the social divisions that drive comparative political analysis (namely among oligarchic factions, peasants vs. smallholders, Sandinista *renovadores* vs. *ortodoxos*, and divisions within religious organizations) as well as the impact of institutional reforms such as political decentralization without requisite resources.

Chomsky writes after the beginning of the Sandinistas’ brutal 2018 crackdown on dissent yet before the regime increased its reign of suppression in anticipation of the November 2021 elections. Many scholars of Central America struggle with the

dissonance of what Sandinista revolution and rule promised in contrast to the current tragic irony of "son la misma cosa" (the comparison of current President Daniel Ortega to the former dictatorship of the Somoza family).

The work draws upon scholarship in different disciplines, spanning the social sciences and the humanities. Scholarship in Spanish, however, is lacking. Readers benefit from the integration of disciplines and from the juxtaposition of newer scholarship with seminal works on Central America from the likes of Brockett, Gould, Grandin, LaFaber, McCreary, Sanford, and Wilkinson.

The historical span, multidisciplinary perspective, and wealth of scholarly references of *Central America's Forgotten History* make a valuable contribution for a diverse audience. Readers with little knowledge of the region and the overwhelming impact the United States played in Central America's current problems would be hard pressed to find a more succinct study making such links. On the other hand, the compressed and complete history reminds experts in Latin American studies of the interrelation of history, international relations, and comparative political analysis.

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