



Vol. 13, No. 1, Fall 2015, 379-384

Review/Reseña

Paul Almeida. *Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizen Protest*.
Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Action and Reaction: How Anti-Neoliberalism has revitalized Central American Civil Society

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In 1995, tens of thousands of Costa Rican teachers organized against a package of pension reforms proposed by the government. Designed to secure an International Monetary Fund loan, the plan raised the teachers' retirement age, squeezed their benefits, and demanded higher employee contributions. Passed during the school year's summer break, the reforms so angered teachers they refused to stay quiet. Four of their professional organizations formed an ad hoc coalition that partnered with other state employees, and that summer, tens of thousands of protesters filled the streets of Costa Rica in the largest labor actions the country had seen in decades. The school year began with a teacher work stoppage, and there

were whispers of a general strike. In the end, the results did not match the fury. Though the campaign enjoyed wide support among teachers and state employees, much of the rest of the country shrugged. Too many Costa Ricans thought the teachers' complaints were simply not their problem.

A different drama unfolded a few years later when the government tried to privatize the *Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad* (ICE), Costa Rica's public power and telecommunications giant. Once again, opposition originated among ICE employees, but instead of dwelling on their own fates, they cast the battle as a broadside against the ravages of globalization. University students, consumers, environmentalists, opposition political parties, and elements of the Catholic Church joined the fray, even if some of them (such as peasants threatened by cheap food imports) did so for their own reasons. Protesters set up roadblocks, launched strikes, and marched en masse while sporting ICE's company colors. This time, the government backed down, scrapping immediate privatization plans and setting up a commission that included opposition groups.

In *Mobilizing Democracy*, Paul Almeida found in these and similar experiences a template for anti-neoliberal action that, as he put it, has "resurrected Central American civil society." The perception that neoliberal measures—such as trade liberalization, labor reform, privatization, and austerity—wreak havoc on developing economies and strangle local cultures has paradoxically invigorated some communities by providing dissidents with a common focus. Almeida began his study with a theory of local opposition to globalization that examined a county's democratization, its population's perception of neoliberalism's economic damage, and the resources available both to its state and protesters. He proceeded with individual chapters on Costa Rica, El Salvador, Panama, and Nicaragua, and a combined chapter on Guatemala and Honduras. Noting that democracy arrived, more or less, around the same time as neoliberalism in Central America, he examined why they produced such an explosive combination.

During Central America's long period of state-led development from the 1930s through 1970s, the region's governments modernized their

economies, invested in national infrastructure, and established social safety nets. Yet just as the period of neoliberalism that began in the 1980s—and the protest movements it spawned—reflected local conditions, thus mid-century state-led development varied from country to country. For example, Costa Rica developed a robust leftist movement as early as the 1930s when the Costa Rican Communist Party organized banana workers against the United Fruit Company. Even when the Communist Party was outlawed from 1948 to 1975, its members remained politically active in other social movements and parties. The result was a “tropical welfare state” shaped by what some have called “social movement partyism,” or the use of opposition political parties to organize social movements and not just electoral coalitions. Quite different was El Salvador’s experience, where a military government directed state-led development. Though dictatorial politically, the regime took some steps toward economic democratization, including generous investments in education, transportation, telecommunications, and health care, as well as the establishment of a social security system.

As Almeida showed, such differences mattered when the era of authoritarianism and state-directed development gave way to an era of democracy and neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s. With the arrival of democracy, previously banned parties once again competed openly (perhaps with new names), and some paramilitary groups such as El Salvador’s *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) entered electoral politics. Unfortunately, the so-called free market reforms that accompanied open elections and wider democratic participation also deteriorated or dismantled the social safety nets that state-led development had provided. Along with the schools, hospitals, and expensive militaries built between the 1930s and 1970s had come a mountain of developed-world debt that the World Bank and IMF could use to coerce new economic politics in the region. During what Almeida called the first round of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s, Central American governments were told to lower trade barriers, cheapen their currencies, and slash public spending, and with a second round of reforms in the 1990s came a host of privatization schemes. The resources with which Central American civil

societies could respond to these changes stemmed directly from their experiences during the period of state-led development: some had already-established opposition parties; others had to create them. Some had robust educational institutions and labor groups; others could draw on traditions of agricultural organizing.

In general, however, *Mobilizing Democracy* develops three broad observations. First, building multi-sectoral coalitions has been essential to the protesters' success. Sectors of society that fared best under the state-level development of 1930s through 1970s—NGOs, labor unions, public employees, opposition political parties, small farmers, and educational institutions—tended to suffer the worst under neoliberalism. As a result, they provided rich sources of support for anti-neoliberal action—but they accomplished more together than separately. Not only were multi-sectoral coalitions more likely to convince governments that opposition was widespread; they were harder to combat, as well. As Almeida noted, strikebreakers can hurt unions, but they are of little use against NGOs. In Costa Rica, the anti-ICE privatization campaign learned from the teachers' troubles to develop “citizen unionism,” a tactic in which unions organized members as well as nonmembers, workers as well as consumers. In Panama, an anti-water privatization campaign in 1998 developed a “nested structure” in which multi-sectoral coalitions formed at the local level, and then coordinated nationally. Similarly, in Honduras in 2009, coalitions that had formed nearly a decade earlier to oppose privatization and free trade helped to thwart a military coup. Their adaptability demonstrated effectiveness beyond the “economic” issues of neoliberalism.

Second, Almeida showed that geography matters. In addition to analyzing the social location of Central American protesters, he examined their physical locations. Resources available to anti-neoliberal campaigners were not evenly distributed throughout the region, so tracking their distribution helps to explain why some areas were more prone to action than others. Administrative offices tended to be in district capitals, so those cities became logical places for people to lodge complaints against the government. Educational systems grew rapidly during the era of state-led development, so university cities had educated populations capable of

articulating neoliberalism's dangers and students eager to join protest movements. Even transportation infrastructure was important. Especially among rural protesters, the roadblock was a time-honored Central American tactic for getting the government's attention by slowing the national economy, but it required some degree of infrastructure. In each chapter, Almeida included helpful maps to show where anti-neoliberal action was most intense.

Finally, Almeida illustrated the importance of "strategic capital," or a given population's level of organizing experience. Not only were historical precedents important, but also anti-neoliberalism had a way of building onto itself, which is why it had a community-constructed dimension. Sometimes, organizational activity of one kind evolved into something wider. The FMLN's evolution into a major political party is a prime example. Likewise, Panamanian organizations formed during the 1998 water battle provided role models and expertise for later campaigns against social security cuts and health care privatization.

Mobilizing Democracy is a highly readable, ground-level study of an underappreciated aspect of neoliberalism—the ways it can revitalize political consciousness among disenfranchised and exploited populations by prompting them to leverage local social and cultural resources. On one level, globalization is about sameness and the privileging of global organizations over local communities. On another level, however, politics is still local, and globalization is not experienced in the same way in all locations. By paying attention to the specific resources anti-globalization protesters used, the location of those resources, and the changes that democracy brought to Central American anti-neoliberalism, Almeida convincingly demonstrates that even nation-level data can be too aggregated. He also makes a compelling case that while more is known about neoliberalism and its opponents in the global North, the global South is where the action is—or at least where contributions such as Almeida's are most needed. Historians will appreciate how he traced Central America's transition from the era of state-directed development to the arrival of democratization and neoliberalism, and they will appreciate how he examines the evolution of protest strategies from the less focused sectoral

campaigns of the 1980s to the multi-sectoral coalitions of recent decades. Political scientists and sociologists will appreciate Almeida's successful probing of local variation. Finally, anyone seeking a theoretical handle on the dynamic nature of Central American anti-neoliberal protest will find his theory of local opposition to globalization a useful tool for analyzing future developments.