




- SUBSCRIBE
- GIVE A GIFT
- LOG IN TO ACCESS THE DIGITAL ISSUE
- SIGN UP FOR AQ UPDATES

- [Subscribe](#)
- [About](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [News](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Partners](#)

## ARCHIVE

From issue: **Consulta Previa and Investment** (Spring 2014)

## Fresh Look Reviews

Fresh, unique perspectives on recent books from across the hemisphere originally published in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

In this issue:

- [\*Cuban Revelations: Behind the Scenes in Havana\* by Marc Frank](#)
- [\*Dangerous Liaisons: Organized Crime and Political Finance in Latin America and Beyond\* by Kevin Casas-Zamora \(editor\)](#)
- [\*The Promise of Participation: Experiments in Participatory Governance in Honduras and Guatemala\* by Daniel Altschuler and Javier Corrales](#)



Photo and homepage photo: Lars Klove

## [\*\*\*Cuban Revelations: Behind the Scenes in Havana\* by Marc Frank\*\*](#)

BY

[\*\*Ted Piccone\*\*](#)

Popular interest in Cuba will continue to grow as Americans open their eyes and ears to one key fact: after 55 years, Cuba is changing. It is shifting from a highly centralized, paternalistic, socialist regime, both lauded and vilified for achieving social progress at the cost of democracy and civil liberties, to a hybrid system in which individual initiative, decentralization and some forms of limited debate are encouraged. As the Castro brothers prepare to leave the scene, they are handing power to a more institutionalized Communist party that maintains tight political control even as it liberalizes the economy.

Marc Frank's new book, *Cuban Revelations: Behind the Scenes in Havana*, expertly captures this evolving terrain. He provides a clear and compelling guide to the transition from Fidel to Raúl Castro after the demise of the Soviet Union. Frank, currently a freelance journalist for Thomson Reuters and the *Financial Times*, deploys his two decades in Cuba and his extensive network of colleagues, friends

and family (he is married to a Cuban) to explain to both seasoned and amateur observers why Cuba's leaders are embarking on a new path.

This is no easy assignment. Nearly everything about life in Cuba today is complicated by Cuba's outsized role during the Cold War, the trauma of exile and the opaque nature of its regime. Despite Cuba's controlled media environment, Frank managed to open doors to information not readily available to others, a testament to his intrepid reporting.

Frank focuses on the Cuban regime's recognition that it needed a "blueprint for survival" to cope with the barrage of challenges it faced in the 1990s and afterward with the withdrawal of Soviet subsidies and assistance, the tightening U.S. embargo, a heavy debt burden, and a few major hurricanes. The author quotes Raúl's address to the National Assembly in August 2009 as evidence of the intellectual shift from a revolutionary ethos to pragmatic governance. "No one, neither a person nor country, can endlessly spend more than they earn," Raúl said. "In the conditions of our imperfect socialism, due to our own shortcomings, quite often two plus two makes three. We should definitely put an end to the irresponsible attitude of consuming while no one, or very few, care to think of how much the country pays to ensure it and, foremost, if it can really do it."

Frank chronicles how the government's efforts to "replace social, across-the-board subsidies with individual reward and targeted welfare," has meant difficult adjustments for most Cubans: the closure of lunchrooms, a steady drop in the value of the monthly rations allotment and layoffs of hundreds of thousands of government workers (the majority of Cuba's workforce). Frank catalogues the decline in the quality of public services such as housing, education and health care—once hallmarks of the revolution—and the steady rise in prices of goods.

There have been, Frank says, liberalizing measures as well—such as the expansion of the "*cuentapropista*" or self-employed sector and a consequent proliferation of food and other small business vendors. Agriculture policy has also been revamped to encourage more cultivation of arable land and direct sales to markets, restaurants and hotels, instead of through the Cuban bureaucracy. Decision making has become more decentralized, with local and provincial governments and party committees gaining some control over economic decision making. Cubans have also been allowed to buy and sell their houses and cars (84 percent of Cuban households own their homes), a move that effectively legalizes and taxes a pre-existing black market increasingly driven by market economics.<sup>1</sup>

To help cope with these adjustments, Cubans benefited from the largesse of Fidel Castro's faithful student, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who happened to control the world's largest reserves of crude oil right next door. In exchange for heavily subsidized energy imports, Cuban doctors and teachers were sent abroad to work in the *barrios* and *favelas* of Caracas and Maracaibo. This has turned out to be a critically important and fortuitous element of the Cuban survival story and deserves more attention than it gets in the book.

No analysis of Cuba's current predicaments would be complete without understanding the role of the United States. Here, Frank notes that President Obama's decision in 2009 to loosen restrictions on travel and remittances for Cuban Americans has had a direct positive effect on many Cuban families. But we are only just beginning to understand how these trends are affecting Cuba's political economy and social dynamics. Many entrepreneurs are now able to start small businesses with cash and goods

from abroad—a subject covered in more detail by Richard Feinberg in “Soft Landing in Cuba? Emerging Entrepreneurs and Middle Classes” (Brookings Institution, November 2013). As more Cuban Americans from across the social spectrum visit the island, and as more Cubans take advantage of Havana’s decision in 2013 to make it easier for them to leave and return to their homeland, a process of dialogue and “humanization” of the long-divided Cuban family is accelerating.

Yet the Castro regime appears in no rush to stop demonizing Washington; nor has it affected the zeal of pro-embargo hardliners in Washington, a subject Frank largely avoids, given his focus (correctly, in my view) on events in Havana rather than Miami.

Frank’s excellent and accessible volume tells us how Cuba is slowly but surely changing, a story largely missed in Washington. Meanwhile, U.S. policy remains firmly wedded to the past. President Obama could do much more to support the Cuban people,<sup>2</sup> but seems bogged down in other crises and unwilling to take the heat given Cuba’s poor human rights record and its continued detention of a USAID contractor. Frank’s work forces the question: should the U.S. remain alone at loggerheads with a Cold War enemy, or begin a process of direct, high-level and comprehensive dialogue with Havana coupled with direct support to the Cuban people?

### [Endnotes](#)

[Back to top](#)

---

## [\*Dangerous Liaisons: Organized Crime and Political Finance in Latin America and Beyond\* by Kevin Casas-Zamora \(editor\)](#)

**BY**

[Jim Swigert](#)

What happens when a government is unwilling or unable to protect its citizens from organized crime? The proposition was tested recently in Michoacán, when “citizen self-defense forces” took up arms against the Knights Templar cartel in the absence of the state’s ability to protect them. Ultimately, federal troops and police joined the citizen militias to push the cartel out of its principal stronghold, but it took citizen vigilantes stepping in to make that progress. Michoacán, unfortunately, is emblematic of struggles elsewhere in Latin America, where criminal networks have been able to thwart state efforts to combat them, often by infiltrating the government—from local police to the highest ranks of elected officials—through bribery and corruption.

Despite efforts to improve public safety in the region, the corrosive impact of organized crime on democracy in the Americas is rarely addressed. *Dangerous Liaisons: Organized Crime and Political Finance in Latin America and Beyond*, edited by Kevin Casas-Zamora, makes an important contribution by examining the ugly triangle of criminals, money and politics.

Casas-Zamora, the secretary for political affairs at the Organization of American States (OAS) and formerly the vice president and minister of planning of Costa Rica, has assembled a knowledgeable

group of experts to contribute to this work. The five case studies from Latin America—Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Mexico—are complemented by two studies from Bulgaria and Italy.

Latin American governments have been preoccupied with the relationship between money and politics for over two decades, enacting reforms to regulate election financing to counter the risk that money from organized crime and drug trafficking pose to the democratic system.

This book offers critical detail that has been missing in prior conversations and provides a useful framework for understanding the key factors that allow organized crime to penetrate politics: weak party systems; anemic enforcement of campaign finance rules; decentralization of power; the increased demand for campaign finance; and impunity for those who violate campaign finance laws. In addition, Casas-Zamora offers a fascinating account of ongoing efforts to keep dirty money out of politics through political finance reform in Costa Rica, where “the scandals kept bubbling up with disturbing regularity.”

Delia M. Ferreira Rubio of Transparency International offers a look at Argentina, where Mexican cartel money reportedly went to the 1999 presidential campaign of Peronist candidate Eduardo Duhalde and vice presidential candidate Ramón Ortega. Although campaign finance regulations were tightened as a result, she says implementation has remained lax. In Brazil, *Universidade Estadual de Campinas* professor Bruno Wilhelm Speck argues that rising public demands for accountability from public officials, a watchdog press and an independent judiciary have worked to expel lawmakers with criminal connections. Still, “the complicity of Brazilian lawmakers with organized crime has reached a critical point.” While signs going forward are hopeful, especially given the 2010 clean record law (*ficha limpa*), which disqualifies anyone convicted of a serious crime from taking political office for eight years, he recommends more reform.

Writing on Colombia, *Universidad Externado de Colombia* professor Mauricio Rubio Pardo discusses the narco-penetration of Congress and drug money in political campaigns, and the ineffectiveness of reforming campaign financing without also tackling tax evasion and ensuring clean accounting. He calls for more research into preventive measures to diminish gang members or vigilantes’ role in politics. Discussing Mexico, political analyst and researcher at the *Universidad Autónoma de México*, Leonardo Curzio, offers helpful typologies for analyzing the relationship between organized crime and political institutions, and says that parties at the state level have had to withdraw candidates and forgo primaries to prevent the cartels from capturing elections. Letting party bosses select candidates is certainly better than drug lords buying them. At the same time, he emphasizes the need for strong internal party controls and oversight. “Parties should ban cash donations [...] increase their own transparency [...] and be monitored by the authorities,” he says. But the most crucial issue for Curzio is not improving the quality of regulations, but enforcing them.

While the case studies on Bulgaria and Italy provide useful global comparisons, readers would have also benefitted from additional chapters on the northern triangle countries of Central America. In these countries the challenges of organized crime and narco-trafficking are especially acute, and the impact on politics, particularly at the local level, is pronounced. A recent study by the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras* documented that 37 local political leaders were killed in 2013.

*Dangerous Liaisons* argues that “organized crime has had it relatively easy in Latin America” when it comes to affecting political outcomes. The case studies make clear that no country has yet to discover a magic formula for immunizing politics from criminal infiltration. Casas-Zamora warns this poses a threat “not just for democratic institutions but also for the state’s very viability.” The question then becomes, what should states do? As shown in Brazil, political culture matters. Public pressure for accountability can achieve progress. Better regulation, more transparency and stronger institutions, including political parties, can also help, but only if coupled with better enforcement.

Casas-Zamora is explicit: *Dangerous Liaisons* is “a call to action” to leave behind “both indifference and [...] political posturing.” As such, this book is a step toward developing a common methodology for analyzing the impact of globalized crime on democratic politics and identifying solutions. This is essential reading for public policy specialists on elections, campaign finance and hemispheric drug policy. It is also relevant for anyone worried about violence and associated risks to democracy. Unless the dirty money that has given cartels and criminal actors unparalleled power—and the politicians who take their money—are curbed, the region’s cycle of violence will continue.

[Back to top](#)

---

## [The Promise of Participation: Experiments in Participatory Governance in Honduras and Guatemala by Daniel Altschuler and Javier Corrales](#)

BY

[Ariel Fiszbein](#)

Can democracy be built from the bottom up? Does community participation in small-scale initiatives increase civic and political engagement in the democratic process overall? In *The Promise of Participation: Experiments in Participatory Governance in Honduras and Guatemala*, Daniel Altschuler and Javier Corrales argue that efforts to engage local communities through community-managed schools (CMS) can increase civic participation more broadly, but require strong state support over time—support made difficult by prevailing legacies of authoritarianism and social exclusion.

Their book is a welcome contribution to the long-standing discussion on whether and how civic participation bolsters civil society and, in turn, strengthens democracy.

Facing weak civil society left behind by authoritarian regimes, Guatemala and Honduras decided in the 1990s to try a new strategy to promote civic engagement and improve education in disconnected rural communities. Decision-making authority over public schools was transferred from the government to the communities. Parents and community members in poor, rural areas took on responsibilities from managing school budgets to hiring and firing teachers.

Corrales, a political science professor at Amherst College, and Altschuler, a community organizer and

political scientist, explore the impact of those programs in detail. Why schools? Especially in rural communities, they provide a natural platform for parents and community members to participate in decision making that directly affects their lives. International donors like the World Bank have recognized this and provided funding to the programs in Guatemala, Honduras and other countries.

The authors also point out that CMS programs have benefited from support across the political spectrum. As they note, “Participatory initiatives appealed to the ideological left (though not teachers unions) because of their ability to enhance participatory democracy, serve as a check on state power and improve social service provision.” At the same time, they “appealed to the ideological right because of their support for circumscribing the role of the central government.”

The book draws on an impressive amount of survey data the authors collected in more than 400 communities, and offers well-thought-out analysis. The quantitative information is complemented by case studies in some of the same communities.

The authors are candid about the limitations they faced. For example, the lack of a baseline for levels of community participation forced them to measure changes in members’ participation on the basis of their recollections. As they acknowledge, this is not the type of counterfactual analysis social scientists are increasingly using these days. Nevertheless, the level of care the authors took in their statistical analyses and the use of qualitative analysis ends up making a compelling case overall.

Altschuler and Corrales are refreshingly clear and meticulous in defining the questions they address, spelling out the logic of their arguments in an accessible way. They transparently explain how they went about measuring abstract concepts that are central to their argument. We know that “political learning among the poor” was measured by how those interviewed assessed their deliberative skills and their motivation and confidence in participating in decision-making bodies. Or that “reshaping of political networks” was measured by the increase in number of civil society organizations and the involvement of excluded groups in those organizations.

Altschuler and Corrales conclude that CMS did increase communities’ capacity for civic participation. For example, 77 percent of Guatemalan respondents and 53 percent of Honduran respondents reported learning at least one skill by participating in managing their local school, and 34 percent and 26 percent, respectively, reported applying those skills to other organizations. But they also found that, overall, those higher capacities did not result in deeper transformations in the way civil society engages with governments to influence decisions and demand accountability.

The case studies found that while there was a thickening of civil society (that is, more organizations with more membership), there was not an improved ability to advocate for the community or engage with the state.

The authors also found a wide divergence in the benefits of CMS. Those with higher socioeconomic status and a higher level of personal involvement in the school councils acquired more skills. Those communities receiving greater levels of state support for training also developed more skills. And women did not learn as many skills as men.

“Being female had a negative impact on the likelihood of subsequent leadership, reinforcing the hypothesis that traditional/conservative gender norms towards women impacted spillover outcomes,”

they said.

The most interesting parts of the book examine how national political dynamics effectively limited the impact of CMS. In Honduras, patronage was a major factor, and the program was transformed from one to empower parents to run schools into a tool for partisan political advantage.

“Contrary to the program’s design, parents did not hire teachers in many [project community] schools. Instead, *promotores* [program employees appointed by the government] hired teachers with political recommendations.” This, paradoxically, ends up protecting the program and sustaining it over time.

For Altschuler and Corrales, the central question is whether small-scale participatory initiatives such as CMS can contribute to broader participatory governance. Their answer is finely balanced and sensible—ostensibly yes, but partisan interests and prevailing traditions of social exclusion seriously hampered the program’s potential.

This book should motivate supporters of local participatory initiatives to go back to the drawing board to see how it could be done better. Others, however, may find in it a confirmation that small-scale experiments in participatory governance are an insufficient counterweight to entrenched, non-democratic, political legacies. Regardless of which side of the debate the reader is on, *The Promise of Participation* provides a refreshing and enlightened perspective on a question that is fundamental to all countries in Latin America.

[Back to top](#)

---





## Connect with AQ



## Most Popular

### MOST POPULAR ON AQ ONLINE

[Most Viewed](#)

---

Past: **1 day** [1 week](#) [1 month](#) [1 year](#)

---

**[Brazil, Ecuador, and the Inter-American Human Rights System](#)** (76 times)

**[Venezuelan Attorney General Denies Leopoldo López Parliamentary Candidacy](#)** (23 times)

**[Colombian Military Join Peace Talks](#)** (23 times)

**[Terrorism: Fear is Not a Policy](#)** (20 times)

**[Resource Extraction and Protest in Peru](#)** (14 times)

### WEB EXCLUSIVES

- [AQ Slideshow: El Bote at Cambalache: Life at a Landfill](#)

*February 13, 2015*

by [Timothy Bouldry](#)



For years, the Indigenous Warao relied on "El Bote," the landfill in Cambalache, Venezuela for their livelihood.

View a slideshow of "El Bote"  
to learn more.

- [AQ Slideshow: Climbing Aconcagua, the Summit of the Americas](#)

*February 5, 2015*

by [Stephen Kurczy](#)



Aconcagua is the tallest peak  
in the Western Hemisphere  
and a meeting place for people  
from around the world.

[MORE WEB EXCLUSIVES »](#)

**AQ Online is sponsored by**



**AQ Course Packets: Now Available for Your Classroom!**



[Browse our catalogue.](#)

## NOW ON AS/COA ONLINE

---

### [Parting Shot: Leading Talent](#)

by Susan Segal - 21 hours ago

When it comes to gender parity in leadership positions, Latin America is falling behind. Fewer than 5% of the world's ...

### [Weekly Chart: Latin American Women in Leadership](#)

by Luisa LemeCarin Zissis - Mar 06, 2015

When it comes to women leaders in government, the Americas has made strides in the past 15 years. The average portion of women ...

### [Exhibition Opens Window to World of Latin American Design](#)

Mar 06, 2015

A new exhibition offers a look at the world of Latin American Design, a period regarded as one of the region's most ...



## AQ MEDIA PARTNER

### FINANCIAL TIMES

World

---

#### [Politicians named in Petrobras scandal](#)

18 hours ago

Supreme court to investigate heads of both houses of Congress

Companies

---

#### [Politicians named in Petrobras scandal](#)

18 hours ago

Supreme court to investigate heads of both houses of Congress

