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Living in a Promiseland?: Mexican Immigration and American Obligations

Rogers M. Smith

with responses by Edwina Baravosa, Rafael Alarcón, and Louis DeSipio

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Cover Art: Undocumented immigrants apprehended in the desert near the Mexican border are processed before being transported to a detention center June 1, 2010 near Sasabe, Arizona. They were captured in a group of 10 immigrants navigating the desert at night about two miles north of the border. During the 2009 fiscal year 540,865 undocumented immigrants were apprehended entering the United States illegally along the Mexican border, 241,000 of those were captured in the 262 mile stretch of the border known as the Tucson Sector. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

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strongly with the intellectual elite. This shortcoming may be attributed to the observation that his book is in many ways a work of advocacy by a public intellectual, who, through his frequent writings in Iranian media and visits to the country, has managed to insert himself into intellectual deliberations taking place there. Contrary to Kamrava, who was simply reporting on intellectual currents and debates without taking sides, Mirsepassi is himself a party to the debate and may have overstated the differences between the two approaches. Can he really claim that the Magna Carta, the Federalist Papers and the ideas of such thinkers as Mill, Rousseau, Jefferson, and Madison had no role to play in the development of democracy in the Western world?

One can also take issue with Mirsepassi's appropriation of Rorty by pointing out that whatever Rorty says about democracy is primarily about *liberal* democracy. Like John Rawls, Rorty believes that democracy has primacy in contemporary Western liberalist societies exactly because a certain epistemology (pragmatism) and a certain philosophical view (secular liberalism) are already imbedded in these societies. In other words, we can stop worrying about truth not because it is unimportant and inconsequential to democracy but, rather, because we have already articulated what we mean by truth, philosophically as well as historically. Mirsepassi's reading overlooks Rorty's philosophical armor in defense of liberal democracy. Furthermore, the application of the ideas of this liberal/secular/pragmatist philosopher to a country like Iran, where the ruling elite claim divine mandate, legalistic Islam is the nomenclature of statecraft, the body politic is divided, laws are applied arbitrary, and nonliberalist truth claims are still in vogue, is problematical to say the least.

As for Kamrava, regrettably he does not situate his analysis in terms of the economic and social transformations of Iranian society over the last three decades. Taking into account such factors as the rapid urbanization of the population, enlargement of the higher education system, attenuated nature of class relations, empowerment of new social groups, boldness of women's and youth movements, and so on could have given more heft to the author's analysis of the trajectory and dynamics underpinning each of these three intellectual currents.

Arjomand, Kamrava, and Mirsepassi all concentrate mainly on the post-Khomeini phase ("the second republic") of Iranian polity and are in concordance that the grandiose experiment of the Islamic republic has failed. Arjomand and Mirsepassi also criticize the platform of Islamic reformists, but from different angles. While Arjomand is critical of the persistent attachment of these intellectual activists to a revolutionary discourse and their political timidity in challenging the "clerical monarchy" (p. 91), Mirsepassi takes them to task for being seduced by abstract thoughts about democracy. Unfortunately, none of the three authors really engages with the impressive

body of political science literature on democratic transition or the persistence of authoritarianism to help us situate Iran in a larger theoretical framework. Similarly, engagement with the perceptive writings of scholars like Rajeev Bhargava, José Casanova, Alfred Stepan, and Charles Taylor could have further enriched discussions of the present and future prospects of "public religion" in Iran.

Many years ago, an astute analyst described the 1979 Iranian revolution as the victory of "ignorance over oppression." Arjomand, Kamrava, and Mirsepassi manage to demonstrate that the Iranian society has come a long way in addressing the obliviousness charge but that, alas, oppression endures. In their own unique ways, each author has provided us with valuable insights into the epistemological tumult, theological fury, and recondite politics of post-revolutionary Iran. Three decades after the revolution, more empirically based studies of Iran's Byzantine political structure and its political elite are needed to account for the durability of theocratic authoritarianism.

Tax Evasion and the Rule of Law in Latin America: The Political Culture of Cheating and Compliance in Argentina and Chile. By Marcelo Bergman. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2009. 280p. \$65.00.

War, Revenue and State Building: Financing the Development of the American State. By Sheldon D. Pollack. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 2009. 328p. \$24.95.
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— Isaac William Martin, *University of California, San Diego*

For most of the twentieth century, the study of taxation was the province of economists, and the research literature on taxes was concerned with market efficiency and distributional equity, to the near exclusion of other issues. That is changing: The works reviewed here, by a sociologist and a political scientist, respectively, exemplify the recent revival of what Joseph Schumpeter called "fiscal sociology." Like other scholars of the new fiscal sociology, these authors use comparative methods to identify causal relationships between the revenue policies of particular states and the characteristics of their enviroing societies. In particular, both focus on the relationship between effective tax administration and cultural norms that legitimate taxation.

Marcelo Bergman's *Tax Evasion and the Rule of Law in Latin America* concerns the relationship between tax administration and the cultural norm of tax compliance. You might expect such norms to be irrelevant if you have a rational enforcement bureaucracy that wields the credible threat of sanctions. Instead, the comparative evidence suggests that strong enforcement goes hand in hand with informal cultural taboos on tax evasion; tax administration and tax culture seem to function as complements, not substitutes. One hypothesis to explain this pattern is that bureaucratic administration fosters compliance norms by reassuring compliant taxpayers that free riders are not

taking advantage of them. Another, alternative hypothesis is that a tax compliance culture improves the quality of tax administration, by reducing the costs of surveillance and enforcement. Bergman argues that both hypotheses are correct, and that the causation is reciprocal. We should, therefore, expect politics to tend toward one of two equilibria, a high-compliance equilibrium or a low-compliance equilibrium.

Bergman subjects his theory to an impressive battery of tests, drawing especially on detailed qualitative and quantitative comparisons of high-compliance Chile to low-compliance Argentina. These two countries differ with respect to tax culture, but are otherwise similar with respect to levels of development, colonial legacies, and revenue strategies. The author argues that their tax cultures are self-reproducing equilibria in which administrative enforcement and cultural norms reinforce each other. He draws on several original surveys to show, for example, that Argentines, in comparison to Chileans, believe that their tax administration has less information about their finances (p. 89); believe their odds of detection are much lower if they cheat (p. 92); and are more willing to risk under-reporting their tax liability—especially if they have previously been audited (pp. 96, 99). He presents longitudinal administrative data from a matched sample of audited and unaudited taxpayers to support his thesis that the low compliance rate of audited taxpayers is a perverse causal effect of audits gone wrong: Taxpayers who are audited only superficially learn that the tax administration is “all bark but no bite” (p. 124), and reduce their subsequent tax compliance accordingly (pp. 136–37, 151). Bergman also reports experimental evidence that information about the frequency of noncompliance affected the likelihood that subjects would cheat in a repeated assurance game (pp. 193–4). And he rounds out the study with a simulation to show that the choice of audit strategy matters a great deal; the wrong strategy will do little to deter the spread of cheating in a population of rational agents who look to their social environment for information about the odds of getting caught (p. 232). Differences in tax culture, in short, are endogenous to differences in the quality of tax enforcement.

As this partial summary suggests, the book draws on an impressive collection of data. Bergman’s comparative research design is exemplary, and his book may be read with profit even by comparativists who do not study taxation or Latin America. It would be a good teaching text for a graduate seminar on research methods.

How persuasive is all this evidence? It is inevitable in a study of tax compliance that many of the measurement decisions will remain debatable. The behavior at issue—noncompliance—is not observed directly but must be inferred from national income statistics, administrative records showing variability in tax payments, potentially incriminating and therefore unreliable survey self-reports,

and the like. Bergman relies of necessity on different data sources for the two countries, and the measures are not always as comparable as one would like. The samples of audited and unaudited taxpayers are matched on a few observable characteristics, but taxpayers were not randomly assigned to these groups, and the experiments, which *did* randomly assign audits, failed to reproduce the finding that audit reduces subsequent compliance (p. 195), and so this key causal inference is by no means certain. Still, for all of these quibbles, I expect that this is about as definitive a treatment as this subject is likely to get in a real world of constrained research design. The book persuaded me that Argentina is probably caught in a non-compliance trap, and that a culture of noncompliance is endogenous to weak enforcement.

I was somewhat less persuaded by the evidence that efficient tax administration can initiate a virtuous circle. By some measures, Chilean auditors seem no more effective than their Argentine counterparts (see, e.g., pp. 136, 151), and the simulation results suggest that it is easier to tear down a culture of tax compliance by auditing carelessly than to build one up by auditing wisely (p. 232). Bergman presents some historical evidence to show that compliance behavior in the two countries has differed at least since the 1970s (pp. 71–73), but the book left me wondering what miracle put Chile on the virtuous path in the first place.

If Sheldon Pollack is right, the answer is probably war. The question of critical junctures in tax administration is addressed explicitly in Pollack’s *War, Revenue and State Building*. This book concerns the United States, which appears in Bergman’s study as a shadow case that exemplifies a strong culture of tax compliance and effective administration (see, e.g., pp. 4–5, 70, 111, 166). As Pollack points out, however, the United States is also known to comparativists for an ideological climate that is distinctively hostile to taxation. His central question concerns how these observations of the United States can be reconciled: Given the antistatist political culture of the United States, how did it “emerge in the twentieth century as the most powerful nation-state in the world with a robust revenue system capable of supporting a global military force as well as the panoply of expensive social welfare programs adopted since the 1930s?” (p. 107). The answer, he argues, is that the cultural barriers to effective revenue administration were episodically relaxed during total wars, when elites overcame their reluctance to tax and people overcame their reluctance to pay. The result was “a series of sporadic episodes in state building” (p. 108) that expanded the revenue-raising capacity of the federal government.

This argument is not particularly novel, which is another way of saying that it is consistent with a large literature. The connections among war, revenue, and state building will be familiar to anyone who is versed in the

comparative scholarship on early-modern state formation. A similar “punctuated equilibrium” argument to Pollack’s has been applied to the development of the U.S. tax state in W. Elliot Brownlee’s *Federal Taxation in America: A Short History* (1996), among many others. Pollack knows these literatures and reviews them ably here. Indeed, the greatest contribution of his book may be precisely in bringing these literatures together by explicitly comparing the late modern United States to early modern Europe. Whereas Bergman compares similar systems in order to isolate the causes of taxpaying culture, Pollack uses comparison to show that similar causal mechanisms operate in very different social environments (pp. 36–37), and, most provocatively, to show that the basic dynamics of state formation in this precocious industrial democracy were similar to those in the agrarian autocracies of early modern Europe. One implication of his argument is that the causal variables most commonly emphasized by scholars of American politics—the preferences of the median voter, the institutional rules of Congress, the federalist order enshrined in the Constitution, and the character of the party system—may have little to do with explaining the growth of the American tax state. Total wars have increased state capacity to extract resources at least since the fifteenth century, even in societies that did not have voters, legislatures, written constitutions, or political parties (see pp. 62–67).

These two books help to solve some puzzles in comparative fiscal sociology, but their juxtaposition leaves us with a new puzzle. In comparative perspective, the United States appears to possess both a strong tax compliance culture and a conspicuously antistatist culture in which the specter of taxation evokes profound suspicion of government. Why are so many Americans so willing to comply with burdens they claim to regard as unfair or tyrannical? Perhaps the vaunted antistatistism of American political culture is largely pretense, or pretext—and the pervasive discourse of tax resentment and rebellion in the United States is not always really about taxes.

Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela: The Chávez Authoritarian Experiment. By Allan R. Brewer-Carías.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 418p. \$115.00 cloth, \$39.99 paper.

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— Forrest D. Colburn, *City University of New York and INCAE*

Hugo Chávez has been widely discussed—and debated. Unlike most other Latin American countries, Venezuela did not fall prey to military authoritarianism in the heady decades of the 1960s and 1970s. A two-party democracy held sway, but was marred by cronyism and corruption. The prevailing calm ended in 1989, with riots sparked by an economic austerity program. There was a loss of 200 lives, and a loss, too, of credibility for the political regime.

Officers led by then–Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez attempted a coup d’état, but were foiled and arrested. An unrepentant Chávez emerged from prison with enough of a name for himself to run for president—on a campaign to end corruption, but pledging, too, to press for the election of a constituent assembly to write a new constitution for the country. His victory in the December 1998 elections was more than a triumph for him; it was a stinging indictment of Venezuela’s democracy. Established political leaders and institutions had lost such a degree of legitimacy that an outsider, and, indeed, one who had attempted to use violence to seize control of the state, was elected.

Chávez suggested that a new beginning was necessary for Venezuela and, invoking the country’s hero from independence, Simón Bolívar, coined the term “the Bolivarian Revolution,” which he would champion, and which he said would bring to Venezuela “socialism of the twenty-first century.” Chávez was a loquacious orator, and he offered heaping criticism of Venezuela’s established political and economic institutions—and actors. He also criticized the United States, reviving the discourse of “*el imperialismo yanqui*.” With his combative tone, he was inspiring to millions of poor—and even middle-class—Venezuelans, and also to many outside the country.

Intellectuals, including those in the United States and Europe, were quick to classify Chávez as being on the “left.” His ascendancy to the presidency of Venezuela was held to be part of a widespread “leftward” shift in Latin American politics, as reflected in the electoral victories of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Michelle Bachelet in Chile. Numerous analyses focused on Latin America’s increasingly radical orientation in economic and social policy, as well as in international affairs. Books emerged with such titles as *The New Latin American Left: Utopia Reborn* (by Patrick Barret, Daniel Chavez and Cezar Rodriguez-Garavito, 2008). Chávez was the most visible leader—and for many the most inspiring—of this reported swing to the left. A biography written by Bart Jones was published with the title *Hugo: The Hugo Chávez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution*, 2008. He was the protagonist in films, too, such as *Chávez: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. Many scholars at prominent academic institutions both within Latin America and outside the region publicly embraced the purported swing to the left in Latin America, and of Chávez in particular, as a route to progressive change.

With the passage of just a few years, perceptions have changed. Some held to be on the left, such as Lula and Bachelet, appeared more pragmatic than anything else. Recent elections in Latin America have gone the way of “centrists.” And, just as importantly, there has been a reassessment of those held to be firmly on the left—especially of Chávez. There are two important questions: 1) What