The four case studies that follow are intended to sharpen the focus of the broader analyses. They are Mexico’s historic transition to democracy in 2000 and its deepening in 2006, by Arturo Santa-Cruz (University of Guadalajara); Venezuela’s unorthodox initiatives in the region, by Thomas Legler (Ibero-American University); Brazil’s Lula da Silva era, with its multiple domestic successes and active strategic positioning in both regional and world affairs, by Luiz Pedone (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro); and the analysis by Yasmine Shamsie (Wilfrid Laurier University) of Haiti’s efforts to deal with the forces of globalization. Each highlights important examples of specific country responses to internal and external forces.

While the volume is commendable as an effort to illuminate some of the key challenges that the still-incomplete democracies of Latin America face and some of the ways they are trying to overcome them, it suffers from a lack of discussion of the larger historical context, longitudinal data to flesh out some of the trends and to support some of the conclusions, and, as the editors recognize, additional cases that reflect more fully the variety of regional patterns. As in too many edited works, in spite of several excellent chapters, the core themes are not fully developed in a consistent manner throughout the book. On balance, the editors have provided the reader with a provocative and valuable compilation of interpretations of how Latin American democracies are coping with the multiple internal and external issues that beset them; yet the sum of their efforts is less than some of their outstanding individual parts.

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This edited volume, the first English-language collection of readings on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (hereafter LGBT) politics in Latin America, is long overdue. Specialists in Latin American politics have seldom analyzed LGBT issues. The editors suggest that this neglect could create the impression that such issues are relatively inconsequential for the region’s politics. By publishing this reader, they aim to challenge this view and to show how the study of LGBT politics can shed light on activism and social movements, democratization, policymaking, and other themes of perennial concern to political scientists.

To a large extent, the volume succeeds in advancing these goals. Moreover, by assembling pertinent readings into a single volume, the
editors have created a valuable reference for scholars interested in researching and teaching LGBT issues. This scholarly community will likely grow larger, given Argentina’s new status as the first Latin American country to legalize same-sex marriage. Although President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner signed the bill into law in July 2010, after the volume had been published, this milestone provides further support for the editors’ conclusion that LGBT rights have expanded in the region.

The collection is vast. It includes 34 different contributions, as well as the editors’ introduction, and provides insights from Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, and additional countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Particular attention is given to historical and contemporary trends in Argentina and Brazil, where LGBT activists have organized for decades and have achieved significant visibility. The volume’s contributors include activists, political leaders, and scholars based in numerous countries, who offer diverse and provocative views on LGBT issues. Some of the essays are works of social science, while others provide more descriptive overviews or personal reflections. A majority of the pieces have been published previously in journals, edited volumes, and other venues; some are abridged versions of the originals.

The editors have organized the chapters into six sections, which include nation building and heteronormativity, sexuality-based political struggles, LGBT movements’ relations with political parties and legislators, the state and public policies, intrasociety relations, and diversities within LGBT communities. Given the sheer number and variety of topics covered in each of these categories, it is not possible to discuss the essays individually in this review. Instead, I will comment primarily on the merits and shortcomings of the volume as a whole.

In their introduction, titled “The Comparative Politics of Sexuality in Latin America,” Corrales and Pecheny state, “the struggle for LGBT rights in Latin America has made unprecedented inroads in the first decade of the twenty-first century” (2). These gains have not been enjoyed equally across the region, however, which raises the question, what factors have advanced or obstructed LGBT rights? The editors devote considerable attention to the myriad obstacles that LGBT individuals and activists typically encounter. To illustrate, the predominance of heteronormativity in the cultures and societies of Latin America privileges reproductive heterosexuality and increases the costs and risks associated with publicly expressing one’s LGBT identity. Achieving strength in numbers is made difficult because LGBT citizens represent a small proportion of the population and can disguise their desires and behaviors, thereby relying on various types of “closets.” The authors also discuss a number of further impediments, including the influence of the Catholic Church and Evangelical denominations, economic challenges owing to limited job opportunities, the violence that is sometimes threatened or used against LGBT
communities, the dearth of public spaces available to such groups, and the tendency for young adults to live with their families for extended periods of time, thus complicating their coming-out experiences.

Corrales and Pecheny’s emphasis on these (and other) serious obstacles is understandable. Nevertheless, by focusing almost exclusively on the forces that hinder LGBT organizing, the authors miss an opportunity to elucidate the factors that have heightened the political salience of LGBT issues and promoted the dramatic expansion of rights in recent years. For example, the State of Rio de Janeiro prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in private and public establishments in 2000. The legislature of the City of Buenos Aires gave all couples the right to register their civil unions in 2002. Mexico City’s 2006 Cohabitation Law granted same-sex couples marital rights identical to those given to men and women in common-law relationships. The following year, Uruguay passed legislation allowing couples who have cohabited for at least five years to gain access to pension, health, and other benefits. The editors and contributors highlight an array of additional policies designed to combat homophobia, ban discrimination, and legally recognize same-sex couples. These significant achievements, which Corrales and Pecheny describe as nothing short of “remarkable,” demand explanation (11). Perhaps the data needed to draw any firm conclusions are simply not available at present. This challenge notwithstanding, some preliminary arguments regarding the ability of LGBT communities and activists to overcome the aforementioned obstacles and influence policymaking would be welcome.

On a related note, I suspect that many political scientists would be interested in the answers, however tentative, to several questions that the editors seem hesitant to fully address. For instance, to what extent has the so-called pink tide, the electoral victories of left-leaning presidents in the region, affected LGBT politics? In which countries or locales do LGBT organizations constitute an actual LGBT movement, and under what circumstances do such social movements emerge? The task of generating hypotheses from the individual essays is left to the reader. Moreover, the editors’ efforts to explicitly connect the ideas presented in this collection to important debates in political science (and in the subfields of comparative politics and Latin American politics in particular) are rather limited. In my estimation, some additional introductory chapters would have strengthened the volume by better acquainting readers with this area of inquiry. Such contributions could have provided a more comprehensive summary of recent trends in LGBT politics and policies, systematic comparisons among countries or cities, an overview of relevant theoretical perspectives or methodological challenges, and similar insights into the current state of the debate.

On the other hand, political scientists will be pleased to discover that a number of chapters are the products of rigorous social science
research: they present a clear argument or explanatory framework, engage existing literature and relevant theoretical approaches, and provide convincing empirical evidence. Readers in search of such contributions will be interested in the essays by Stephen Brown, Rafael de la Dehesa, Elisabeth Jay Friedman, Eduardo J. Gómez, Juan P. Marsiaj, Mario Pecheny, and Millie Thayer, among others. These studies successfully link LGBT issues to broader debates in political science and related disciplines.

Indeed, readers will gain valuable insights from many of the contributions to this volume. The firsthand accounts of activists that appear in several chapters are especially thought-provoking. To illustrate, Aluminé Moreno’s analysis of identity politics and differences within the LGBT movement in Buenos Aires is based on extensive interviews. In a revealing excerpt, an activist who believes that the identities and agendas of lesbians have been disadvantaged in the movement opines that they have been “losing ground”: during the AIDS epidemic, they assumed the role of “pseudomothers” to care for men afflicted with the disease; subsequently, the cause of transvestites, who were regularly the victims of police and institutional violence, was privileged (“They suffered more than we did, right?”) (389). Moreno also quotes a transgender activist who has little in common with “middle-class gay men who are mostly professionals, who have big salaries, who take vacations” and who “have ideas that aren’t very progressive” (394). Thus, in addition to complications arising from gender differences, one must be mindful of this “social class dynamic” and perceptions that gay men are more affluent and less interested in claiming social and economic rights, while the demands prioritized by transvestites, transsexuals, and transgenders stem partly from their position as members of Argentina’s popular sectors (394). In short, one of the volume’s greatest strengths is its inclusion of multiple and diverse perspectives.

As in most edited volumes, the individual essays vary in quality; nevertheless, I was struck by the consistency of the contributions overall. In addition, the translators who lent their talents to this work appear to have done an admirable job. The collection will undoubtedly serve as a key reference for scholars conducting research on sexuality and gender; however, the volume deserves a wider readership that includes analysts interested in activism, identity politics, citizenship, and human rights. Furthermore, instructors who address these themes in their courses should find a wealth of useful information and engaging Readings in the volume, which will enrich classes that focus predominantly on Latin America, as well as those that approach such topics from a more broadly comparative perspective.

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