social norms in the long term (chapter 6 by Mala Htun and Francesca R. Jensenius). Lastly, chapter 8 (by Belén Fernández M. and Candelaria Garay) analyzes how subnational actors can influence rule-writing processes to produce yet another type of enforcement: nonpunitive enforcement.

Chapters 10 and 11—by Andrew Schrank and Tulia G. Falleti, respectively—discuss unlikely strong institutions. They show how even institutions designed to be ignored (i.e., *window-dressing institutions*) or that are initially ill equipped to succeed can grow stronger if external monitoring, invested bureaucracies, and politically incorporated social actors raise the costs of violation or change.

Institutions are one of the most theoretically and conceptually elusive topics in political science. They are endogenous, hard to define, and hard to operationalize. This book tackles all of these problems with theoretical depth and empirical breadth. Although plenty of literature discusses institutional weakness (e.g., see Scott Mainwaring, *Party Systems in Latin America*, 2018; Javier Corrales, *Fixing Democracy*, 2018; or Yanilda González, "The Social Origins of Institutional Weakness and Change," *World Politics*, 71(1), 2019) and we have a good idea of how it looks, this is the first attempt to conceptualize it in a way that accounts not only for ambition and survival (often misleading indicators of strength) but also the extent to which it actually changes behavior. With this innovative framework of what institutional weakness is, how it manifests itself, and under what circumstances it does so, this book sets a research agenda that had been, until now, present but silent in most works on Latin American politics.

Although conceptualizing institutional weakness is the most important contribution of the book, it is not the only one. This volume is also empirically comprehensive. Even though five chapters draw extensively from previous published work (chapters 3, 4, 5, 8, and 11), the editors and contributors do an excellent job connecting these somewhat disparate sets of research around a common theoretical background. Unlike other edited volumes where contributions merely illustrate a theory or concept, the chapters in this book connect and build on each other, enriching and shaping the framework proposed at the outset of the volume.

Because of its theoretical richness, *The Politics of Institutional Weakness in Latin America* also raises important and exciting questions. Parts of the conceptualization invite refinement. Institutional cost, for example, is defined as equal but also as affecting institutional strength (p. 24), muddling the excellent conceptualization of institutional weakness put forward in the book, as well as the expectations of how it emerges. If the institutional outcome is the result of different levels of significance, instability, or compliance, how can that same outcome be the parameter that actors use to decide whether to obey or change the institution in the first place? Future scholars should look more closely at these different terms and perhaps discuss in more detail the relation between expected and de facto institutional outcomes, as well as their impact on actors' calculations.

The different types of institutional weakness invite more research as well. The book spent very little time discussing insignificant institutions, which have gained relevance in light of the new processes of institutional weakening discussed in the conclusion. As the editors point out, originally strong institutions can become insignificant as social norms adjust to them. Can the opposite happen as well? Can formerly insignificant institutions acquire relevance if social norms change? Institutional weakening has entailed the erosion of informal institutions. Until recently, for example, rules pertaining to the transition between incoming and outgoing administrations in the United States were insignificant. Will they become more relevant in the face of challenges to informal norms that dictated concession and turnover? And if so, are actors likely to comply, fail to comply, or change them? Does that mean we should think of institutional strength less linearly and more dynamically?

These questions show the promise of *The Politics of Institutional Weakness in Latin America.* It is an agenda-setting book, with important theoretical and empirical contributions that are key to better understand politics in the region and elsewhere.

Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes. By Anne Meng. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 275p. $105.00 cloth, $39.99 paper.
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What do we know about dictatorships? A lot, it turns out. They differ from democracies. They are usually characterized by irregular transfers of power between rulers. Smaller groups have greater political influence and power. A dictator's supporters are wracked by rampant uncertainty about his intentions and vice versa, and the dictator tends to mistrust the organizations that launch him into power, which invariably include the military (for what it's worth, 99% of autocrats have been male). Most dictators do not last in office all that long, and many face prison, death, or exile after leaving power. This makes the stakes of controlling the state quite high. More often than not, this leads dictators to engage in short-run calculations to survive in office.

Dictators are usually launched into power through coups (there are too many to identify); revolutions,

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including the Cuban, Iranian, Mexican, Russian, French, and Arab Spring revolts; civil wars, which is how the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua; and foreign interventions, as when the Soviets invaded Poland and Hungary.

Whatever the springboard, an ambitious politician rallies landowners or miners or industrialists to help kick the rascals out and replace them with new ones who may be more reliable: him and his supporters. In most dictatorships, business is in bed with politicians and beholden to them. Consider Germany's industrialization under Bismarck; "corporatist" experiments in Italy, Spain, and Portugal under Fascism in the aftermath of the Great Depression; Mexico under Diaz and then again under the PRI regime during the twentieth century; Argentina under Perón; and contemporary examples from the developing world that include China, Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Venezuela. One key to holding power is to politicize property rights and create and regulate markets to generate rents, perhaps by imposing barriers to entry; these rents can be shared with supporters and help finance the state. A majority of dictators nonetheless command regimes with democratic-like institutions: remarkably, despite institutionalized corruption and impunity, they often boast constitutions, legislatures, courts, political parties, and elections.

Anne Meng's *Constraining Dictatorship* both builds on these verities and challenges them. To solve the puzzle that, although most authoritarian regimes exhibit nominal degrees of pluralism and checks and balances, yet most dictators are more "personalist" than "republican," she explains that only some of these institutions actually represent true constraints on autocrats. She defines these as "rules, procedures, and structures that promote organizational autonomy and permanence" (p. 12). Meng argues that, rather than providing a credible commitment to elites' rights by making it easier for them to coordinate—the consensus view in the literature—democratic-like institutions allow them to address a fundamental dilemma: that their relative power fades over time. What rulers can do to ameliorate intra-elite conflict is provide elites with important positions within the government and institutionalize both promotion within the regime and political succession mechanisms. These strategies enable elites to develop independent power bases and endow them with the de facto power they need down the road to counterbalance a dictator.

Bravo! Meng offers a new theory of credible commitment under dictatorship that does not involve tired hand-tying or signaling arguments—I should know: I have made both types of arguments myself—and brings de facto power back in more soundly. She also formalizes it in a straightforward manner as a bargaining model. The game theory adds considerable insights and generates testable predictions. The main empirical punchline: weak dictators are induced to institutionalize constraints, and strong ones do not need to.

Meng adduces copious evidence to support her theory, including case studies of Cameroon (highly institutionalized) and Ivory Coast (weakly institutionalized). She also constructs and exploits an original panel dataset of sub-Saharan regimes (1960–2010). Meng obtains several results that corroborate her framework. Strong leaders such as founding presidents, nationalist leaders, and post-coup leaders are less likely to institutionalize their regimes. Institutionalized regimes are more likely to create political stability, despite having initially weak leaders. And they are also more likely to usher in a peaceful transition of power to a new executive. Her findings are quite convincing.

Constraining Dictatorship has much to recommend it. It pursues, to its logical conclusion, the so-called institutional turn in the study of authoritarian politics. Indeed, rooted in formalizing strategic interaction and generating testable claims that are generalizable, the book showcases how politics of any type can be reduced to underlying mechanics centered on negotiations between seemingly interchangeable actors. If read by a wide audience, and I believe it should be, it represents a much-needed corrective to the armchair punditry practiced by even some eminent political scientists who, to make sense of the populist era since the early 2000s, have delved into the idiosyncratic psyche of leaders such as Xi, Chávez, Erdoğan, Orbán, and Trump. To explain their behaviors and policies, you need look no further than their narcissism or God-complex or whether their mothers were cold and distant and their fathers absent. Rubbish! Shrewd political actors could not have made it as far as these leaders did, nor could any other executive with dictatorial pretensions, without knowing how to play the game.

Of course, the question remains: Does Meng outline the right game or at least the most important one? Precisely because her framework and "laboratory" foreclose the possibility of democratically elected leaders from engaging in "autocoups" to consolidate power, she misses the opportunity to sketch out the strategic scenario that has brought several colorful, if not infamous, dictators to power. These are scenarios in which an elected executive declares a state of emergency, suspends the legislature and judiciary, or restricts civil liberties to seize more power. Examples include Hitler (1933), Bordaberry in Uruguay (1972), Fujimori in Peru (1993), and Maduro in Venezuela (2017). At first glance autocoups can be subsumed by Meng's framework because they represent the un-consolidation of executive constraints by powerful leaders, implying that they simply do not need pesky institutions to survive politically and get their way nor the back-and-forth and compromise that go with them.

But that reading does not account for how executives who were previously constrained and subject to the rule of law become unshackled by appealing directly to the people

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or, at least, to core supporters. It omits the lies, gaslighting, and conspiracy theories; the stoking of division, fear, hatred, and polarization; and the demonization of scapegoats and fellow citizens that usually accompany populists' rise to power in democracies. Indeed, this seems to be a staple of dictatorship in general that has gone unmentioned and unexamined in the more aseptic, institutionalized literature on autocracy in general.

Yet how do we then explain authoritarians who incite violence to consolidate their power, such as Mussolini, Hitler, Perón, Milosovic, Rwanda's Hutu Power, and Trump? Can this dynamic be formalized? And can we deduce empirical implications that gain traction on the variance so we can separate the tinpots from the fascist manqués from the totalitarians?

Although I realize that *Constraining Dictatorship* cannot do everything and it is neither about democracy nor its demise, it does hold lessons for those who study democracy and how it dies. For democracy to hold, executives may not have to hold a normative commitment to a higher court's judicial review of its decisions, the independent power of the legislature, and the sovereignty of subnational governments. Rather, some outside force is what may compel them to do so.

Meng's framework suggests that even in democracies it is really the balance of power that counts, not what is in politicians' hearts or a nation's political values. William F. Buckley, one of the intellectual godfathers of the modern Republican Party—at least the one before Trump—once said that "conservatism is the politics of reality." Meng's book articulates a realist account of authoritarian politics stripped of ideas, norms, and even smoke-filled rooms; what ultimately matters is the degree to which actors are endowed with de facto power, and politics is about reflecting that reality or bringing it to fruition.

If this is true of democracy as much as it is of dictatorship, then we owe it to our students to find out and tell them, lest fantasies about liberty, equality, and fraternity carry us away into dogmatic complacency and put this hard-fought accomplishment at risk. And if it is true, *Constraining Dictatorship* also suggests interesting puzzles about democracy: Is the shadow of violence and coercion what is really behind checks and balances across "republican" regimes, whether they have free and fair elections or not? Do executives who behave themselves, and are subject to the rule of law, ultimately fear the prospect of unleashing the wrath of powerful brokers in a pluralistic society, so that it is not necessarily the internalization of democratic norms that matters but the fear of crossing the wrong actors? What could this possibly be, considering that the executive branch commands authority over the armed forces and police, if not nukes? Is it the threat of revolution or something more quotidian, like the fear of shrinking the economy and tax revenues?

Selling Sex in Kenya: Gendered Agency under Neoliberalism. By Eglė Česnulytė. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 192p. $99.99 cloth.

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Why do some women choose to perform sex work, how do they pursue their goals within the context of the commercial sex industries, and how are these choices shaped by the socioeconomic and gender structures in which they find themselves? In *Selling Sex in Kenya*, Eglė Česnulytė traces the multiple ways that the adoption of neoliberal policies and the embrace of neoliberal ideology have shaped the opportunities available to women and men in the Global South broadly and the choices of women in Kenya's sex industries specifically.

In so doing, Česnulytė emphasizes the value of looking for evidence of the general in the particular, as she focuses on the lived experiences and perspectives of female sex workers in the Kenyan port city of Mombasa. Commercial sex work bridges productive and reproductive forms of labor, a divide many women must navigate, and it is situated in the informal sector to which many women have been relegated. Thus, an exploration of commercial sex helps Česnulytė tell a larger story about the challenges that women face and the strategies they employ in gendered and socioeconomically unequal societies. She also does the important work of centering marginalized women in the frame, helping balance out the implicit and sometimes explicit concern with the privileged Global North and the inattention to gender dynamics that she argues pervades political economy scholarship.

Česnulytė's particular interest is in the array of gendered consequences associated with ostensibly gender-neutral neoliberal discourse and its implementation. She argues that neoliberal policies like privatization and deregulation mine existing social and economic inequalities, including gender inequality, for profit, and that they have complex impacts on women's lives. Although some (privileged) women gain new opportunities to participate in the (formal) labor force as a result of neoliberal reforms, and some also internalize neoliberal ideology in ways that help them pursue profit and improve their position in society, many women are further marginalized by policies that strip away their traditional safety nets and leave them in a position of "gendered precarity" (p. 32). In response, women relegated to the informal sphere within patriarchal systems often find that their well-being depends on performing one of a number of gender roles involving the exchange of reproductive labor for male income, such as "wife," "mistress," or "commercial sex worker."

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