**Transacting Transition: The Micropolitics of Democracy Assistance in the Former Yugoslavia**


*Transacting Transition* highlights the critical reflections of practitioners of democracy aid to present a rare and much-needed window onto the ways that myriad actors and social and political forces shape the implementation of democracy promotion. The contributors use ethnography to reveal how easily opportunities can be missed and to constructively offer approaches that could be adopted to better empower locals. Brown’s opening chapter and concise introductions to each practitioner’s candid chapter on a particular democracy promotion project in Bosnia-Herzegovina, then-Serbia and Montenegro, or Macedonia identify common threads. In this way, *Transacting Transition* avoids the trap that too many edited volumes fall into of collecting a set of rich but disjointed analyses.

Brown opens by providing a helpful overview of the macro-political setting, which traces the evolution of US development aid, complete with its dubious impact. He and his contributors urge readers to recognize the potential of democracy aid if it is well crafted. Through studying thick, they identify several recurring flaws in democratization projects: 1) the requirement of producing quick, quantifiable results to donors from what is a long-term process of community development, 2) the disregard for local practices and knowledge, 3) the tendency for them to get caught up in bureaucratic infighting and local politics, and 4) the failure to consider seriously enough sustainability.

One of the clearest messages of the volume is the harm of relying on quantitative measures for assessing the impact of democracy aid. Merritt uses the case of USAID’s 200 million-US dollar, five-year Community Revitalization through Democratic Action (CRDA) project, which sought to use community development to build interethnic trust, demonstrate the value of citizen participation, and support grassroots democratic action to illustrate the harm caused by requiring early, quantifiable results for community development programs (30). He condemns USAID’s demand for a ‘rapid start’ for compelling CRDA grantees to take short cuts that allowed local power brokers to sneak onto many local development committees and compromised equitable ethnic and gender representation, as well as cost-sharing.

The contributors also hit home the problems that occur when practitioners fail to grasp local social dynamics, practices, and concerns. In a refreshing willingness to discuss a failed project, Turregano, a US peacekeeper in Kosovo, acknowledges that inadequate attention to the complex interaction among various social divisions in the region doomed an effort to rebuild a small town’s ethnically mixed school. The project actually strained interethnic relations when it raised concerns of the Serb community that it would upset the ethnic and cultural balance of the village by attracting an influx of Albanian children from nearby hamlets (159). Of course, listening to local concerns opens up the real possibility that locals prioritize concrete needs, such as electricity and jobs, over democratization (Lane 61). Even when locals are interested in democracy, their notion of it differs significantly than that articulated by donors or implementers (Nuti, 82-4). These realities shape the impact of aid.

Democratization projects are ensnared by bureaucratic and local politics. Contributors single out impediments posed by infighting between different offices of USAID and the UN’s hierarchical and rigid bureaucracy. Nuti (77) details struggles to balance between the goals of USAID and implementing organizations, as well as between theory and local practices. Sneed (111) laments that male elders in rural Montenegro manipulated gender quotas on community development panels by bringing their wives to sit silently in the back of the room.

Lack of emphasis on sustainability also undermines democratization programs. One USAID official even admitted that civic engagement after CRDA ‘doesn’t matter.’ Broughton-Micova (133)
acknowledges that a multiethnic media project in Macedonia that lacked local initiative or consideration of market forces ‘fell apart completely’ after international donor grants dried up.

While the contributors agree about using critical reflection and about some key lessons, there are some lessons they debate. One is investing international implementers with executive authority. While Merritt and Gagnon join those scholars who have generally criticized this as imperialist-leaning, Lane’s believes that the role of the international administrator, which he played in Kosovo, is necessary in post-conflict societies but needs to be done better (47). Greater attention to the conditions under which learning occurs and is applied would have strengthened the volume. USAID’s extension of the CRDA model, including its rapid-start concept, to Iraq and Central Asia raises serious questions about the capability of USAID, if not individual practitioners, to learn lessons.

Readers will both appreciate and be somewhat frustrated by the contributors’ struggle over how best to assess the impact of their work. While they make a convincing case that quantitative measures of performance harm democracy promotion projects, practitioners are likely to seek more specific guidance on how qualitative techniques could be used to meet the inevitable demands by donors for clear indicators of results. Social scientists may lament the contributors’ admittedly ad-hoc collection of data. Gagnon (187) acknowledges that his positive assessment of the CRS collaborative approach of ‘genuine partnership’ with locals is based on discussions with implementers and that a more comprehensive evaluation requires gathering evidence from locals involved. This suggests further research that features the experiences of citizens and local activists with programs for nurturing civic community.

Because it fills a void by providing rich empirical evidence of forces in the field that influence the implementation of democracy promotion programs, Transacting Transition will be valuable to a wide audience in the scholarly and policy making communities involved in democracy aid. The volume will interest social scientists, encouraging dialogue and additional research. The stories about the convoluted evolution of concrete democracy promotion projects will help this process come alive to undergraduate and graduate students of Eastern Europe, democratization, and post-conflict reconstruction.

PAULA M. PICKERING  
The College of William and Mary, USA