

State Building: what scholars interested in state capacity, elite taxation, and security policies want to discuss. But there are other lessons, especially for junior scholars: how to set up a puzzle, how to link different strands of literature, and how to theorize without being hesitant to draw inductive conclusions. When all these things are considered, there is no doubt that Flores-Macías wrote a remarkable book.

Luis Garcia 

Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

NOTE

I am grateful to Hillel Soifer and Ilyssa Yahmi for their insightful feedback on a draft of this text.

Neil Shenai, *Escaping the Governance Trap. Economic Reform in the Northern Triangle*. Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2022. Figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index, 152 pp.; hardcover \$49.99, ebook \$39.99.

The book under review is an interesting contribution to the debate on the immediate future of the region that makes up the so-called Northern Triangle, composed of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and the role that neighboring powers, especially the United States, can play. These reflections come from an author who has an unusual background, as he combines both a solid theoretical grounding with that of a policymaker. In fact, Neil Shenai wrote this book after serving as the US Treasury's financial attaché to Mexico and Central America from 2016 to 2018. Thus, *Escaping the Governance Trap* belongs to a hybrid genre that brings together theoretical reflection, professional experience, and advocacy. In this sense, the text is of particular value to policymakers, academics, and NGO and development agency staff.

The aim of the book is to discuss and offer proposals on how to contribute to the development of a region characterized by widespread poverty, violence, state weakness, an extremely weak economy, and high migratory pressure. The fact that the countries analyzed have the highest rate of violent homicides per one hundred thousand inhabitants in the world among countries not at war is an indication of the complex and dramatic situation on the ground.

With this in mind, the book is divided into three chapters that can be read as separate papers. Each chapter presents a specific topic of study, theoretical tools, hypotheses, and tentative conclusions, and ends with final conclusions that summarize—practically in the form of an executive report—the author's arguments.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the University of Miami. DOI [10.1017/lap.2023.9](https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2023.9)

The first chapter, “From the Northern Triangle to Northern Europe: How Good Governance Can Rescue Central America,” summarizes the theoretical propositions on which the book is based and focuses on the analysis of governance, pointing out that the three countries analyzed have fallen into a so-called governance trap, due to a highly deficient balance between private, community, and public actors. The balance in question accounts for a massive level of economic informality, an epidemic of violence and insecurity, an uncivil political culture, great ecological vulnerability, corruption, and poor state infrastructural capacity. As such, the Weberian conception of the state in the Northern Triangle—as an agent claiming for itself the legitimate monopoly of violence—is a fable, and for decades—perhaps even centuries—states have been unable to meet the most basic needs of their populations: either physical integrity or sustenance.

Against this background of contested sovereignty—or failed state—the author designs a proposal for policy innovation based on a three-pronged strategy: focusing on a specific, well-defined public policy; defining the interests of the actors who influence and participate in this policy; and establishing challenges for improvement based on procedures, criteria, and assessable measures. According to the author, the use—by the actors involved—of this design could lead to changes in the balance of public policies that would make it possible to overcome the “governance trap” and leap toward a better position. According to the author, this line of improvement could be a way the three countries would eventually achieve a system similar to that of Denmark. This assertion is not intended to be naïve, for it is complemented by the author’s caution in pointing out that the countries of the Northern Triangle are heirs to a historical path dependency that biases, limits, and conditions the choices of the competing political actors.

The second chapter, titled “Economic Reform Priorities and the Governance Trap,” is the longest and most detailed. It deals with the main macroeconomic issues; namely fiscal, monetary, and exchange rate policy and, finally, possible structural reforms. This information, already extensively analyzed in many studies, gains greater interest in this book because it has been placed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a way, it could be said that the author reports on the issues raised in light of the “heterodox” policies developed by the three governments in the context of the greatest health, and by extension, social and economic crisis of the last three decades. The author then develops a section with proposals for each of the four priority economic reforms identified.

The chapter ends with partial conclusions and two appendixes. The first shows a diagram outlining the various steps involved in maintaining a transparent financial system with high standards of financial integrity. The second develops a discussion of the assets and liabilities of the (now known to have failed) economic adventure of the Nayib Bukele government with the adoption of bitcoin as a currency. In terms of brief partial conclusions, the author provides a very synthetic and descriptive summary of the above, although he does note one key issue: the limited capacity for maneuver available to the economies of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as

well as their need for external support and cooperation for any attempt at reform. It is precisely the latter issue that is dealt with in the next chapter.

The third chapter, “Enhancing Global Engagement,” has a twofold aim. The first is to point out that international cooperation (and advocacy) has always been a key element of Central American policy, and the second is to argue that in a global world it is necessary for the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to adopt a clear strategy on how best to engage in transnational governance.

On the question of international advocacy, the author discusses in some detail (and with some sympathy) the role (and interference) of the US administration from the Monroe Doctrine (established in 1823) to the end of the Cold War. He also shows with some resignation (and regret?) the change in Washington’s strategic priorities since the end of the twentieth century and, above all, after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers (2001), which has pushed the interest of the world’s leading power in Central America into the background. This is precisely why, in section 1.1 of this chapter, the author points out the strategic interests of the United States in the Northern Triangle and, with a more proactive approach, sets out (in section 1.2) ten principles—or rather proposals—that US foreign policy should adopt toward the three countries in question. These principles can be summarized in four broad guidelines: maintaining stability in the region is a priority for Washington’s strategic interests beyond partisan shifts; the United States should be present in any political initiative in the region; linking multiple domestic, international, and transnational actors (public and private) is important in any plan; and a political order based on liberal-democratic values must be maintained. This is followed by a brief section on the role of Mexico and Canada and another—also brief—section on “International Partners,” referring to regional, hemispheric, and global multilateral organizations. The conclusions emphasize the need for the three Northern Triangle governments to rely on external actors—be they the United States, Canada, Mexico, the private sector, civil society, UN agencies, or international financial institutions—in order to plan and make any progress in the directions proposed by the author.

The final chapter is titled “Conclusions and Potential Futures,” and is a call for action by all the abovementioned actors, with a special emphasis on structural economic reforms and demands for public accountability. Thus, in the final pages of the book, the author outlines the three possible itineraries that are open to the countries of the Northern Triangle in the near future. The first is that everything remains the same; the second, that the situation gets worse; and the third, that improvements are made as a result of a new scenario of cooperation and progress.

To conclude this review, I believe it is important to stress the merit of this work, which is not only a painstaking analysis but also a call to action. However, I cannot conclude without pointing out some gaps. The first is the virtual absence of any mention of the political elites in the three countries and the weak party systems in place. Nor is there any mention of other key actors in the life of the Northern Triangle; namely, the armed forces and illegal groups. This gap is surprising because any possible reform or change needs the support of these actors, whose political culture has often failed to champion the common good. In this regard—and after

reading a book of such parsimony—I wonder whether the author has asked himself what the real interests of the most powerful actors in these three countries actually are. Is it in the interest of these actors to change the perverse balance that is currently generating huge profits for them? Perhaps the powerful are not interested in becoming like Denmark.

Salvador Martí i Puig
University of Girona, Girona, Spain