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REVIEW ESSAY

Socialism and Democracy in Latin America's Left Turns

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Maxwell A. Cameron and Eric Hershberg, eds. 2010. *Latin America's Left Turns: Politics, Policies and Trajectories of Change*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner. ISBN: 978-1-58826-739-9. Paperback: 27.50 USD. Pages: 320.

James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer. 2009. *What's Left in Latin America? Regime Change in New Times*. Farnham: Ashgate. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7797-0. Cloth: 99.95 USD. Pages: 266.

Eduardo Silva. 2009. *Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9780521705721. Paperback: 29.95 CAD. Pages: 336.

Hugo Chávez's victory in Venezuela's 1998 presidential elections marked the beginning of the "pink tide" which swept left governments to power throughout Latin America. Over the course of the next decade, left and centre-left governments were elected in a dozen countries on the basis of opposition to the neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus.[1] Few

[1] Left and centre-left presidential victories have occurred on every part of the continent. In the southern cone countries, Chile led the way with the victory of the socialist Ricardo Lagos in the 2000 elections at the head of the Concertación alliance; his successor, Michelle Bachelet, won the presidential elections six-years later. In Argentina, the late Néstor Kirchner won the 2003 elections at the head of a reconstituted Peronist Party, which his spouse, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, led to victory once again in 2007. Tabaré Vázquez's victory in neighbouring Uruguay at the head of an alliance of left parties (the Frente Amplio) and Fernando Lugo's victory in Paraguay in 2008 completed left power in the sub-region. In Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Worker's Party won elections in 2002 and 2006; his successor, Dilma Rousseff, a former guerrilla, won the 2010 elections. In the Andes, Hugo Chávez won re-elections in 2000 and 2006; the indigenous-socialist leader, Evo Morales, won the 2005 elections in Bolivia; and Rafael Correa, a technocrat with the support of the social movements, followed one year later in Ecuador. In Central America, Álvaro Colom won the 2007 Guatemalan elections at the head of a social democratic alliance; Sandinista leader, Daniel Ortega, returned to power after winning the 2008 elections in Nicaragua; and the following year, Mauricio Funes of another guerrilla group-turned-political party, the FMLN, won in El Salvador. In Peru, Colombia and

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progressive scholars would disagree that the origins of the left electoral victories reside in the crisis of the neoliberal state and the mass resistance engendered by it as social movements organized to contest the policies of inequality and exclusion. A series of books has emerged that provide insightful contributions on the nature of the left regimes, their prospects and political significance.

Eduardo Silva's *Challenging Neoliberalism* examines the rise of the social movements and their emergence as powerful collective actors in the struggle against the imposition of "market society." Although he is critical of many of the shortcomings of the left regimes, he is hopeful that the left turns (of which there are many) will lead to a progressively de-commodified society, though he falls short of asserting the necessity of socialism. Maxwell Cameron and Eric Hershberg's collection of essays in *Latin America's Left Turns* shares a similar optimism. Most contributors agree that the policies of the left governments indicate a strong commitment to democracy and social justice. In those countries where constituent assemblies have re-founded the nation through constitutional change – a hallmark of the left turns – the limitations of liberal democracy have been transcended through institutions and forms of citizenship that enhance participation and social inclusion. In *What's Left in Latin America*, however, veteran Marxist observers of the region, James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, challenge such sanguine assessments. They argue that left-regime change has not led to a fundamental transformation of the neoliberal state – unequal social structures and polarized class relations continue to characterize the region as the centre-left governments pursue a more socially inclusive form of neoliberalism under the post-Washington Consensus.

While each of these contributions provide a different theoretical assessment of the social movements, regime-types, policies and politics of the new left based on comparative analysis of national experiences, a key distinction in their interpretations hinges upon an old theme in the study of Latin American politics – the relationship between democracy and social change (social democratic, socialist or otherwise). Silva and Cameron and Hershberg reject early critical assessments on the third wave transition to democracy in Latin America which held that the elite nature of democratization would foreclose the possibility of creating more socially just societies. The current conjuncture demonstrates, they argue, that the

Mexico, right-wing governments remained in power amidst considerable social instability and opposition.

transition to liberal democracy provided a space for leftist forces to contest the power of dominant classes and political elites. Petras and Veltmeyer, in contrast, point to the limitations of the electoral path to state power, arguing that governing centre-left parties have pursued alliances with dominant classes while co-opting and repressing the social movements. While they are right to insist on the ongoing relevance of socialism, their dismissal of electoral politics overlooks the lessons of the authoritarian past. If each of these contributions adds a valuable perspective to the debate, none provides a full assessment of the challenges and pitfalls of reconciling social transformation with democratic change.

Cameron and Hershberg bring together a collection of mostly social democratic essays on the origins of the left electoral victories and the nature of the left turns. The twelve chapters of the collection are organized according to three sections: thinking about the left, politics beyond liberalism and issues of political economy. A particularly insightful introductory chapter by the editors and John Beasley-Murray frames the discussion in terms of a few common themes that unite the collection, such as constituent versus constituted power, post-liberalism, democracy and the "multitude." The contributors draw upon a combination of approaches rooted in comparative politics, political theory and public policy to analyze and compare the new left regimes.

In terms of the character of the left regimes, the editors reject the tendency to dichotomize the left into one or another of two categories, a tendency that typically gives rise to a division between a "good" social democratic left that follows the basic precepts of the free market and a "bad" populist left that advances unsustainable economic policies and violates the liberal rules of the political game (Jorge Castañeda's division is the most famous example of this type of thinking).[2] As John French states in a chapter on how the left regimes compare, the "sharp juxtaposition of social democracy and populism originates in the policing efforts by the neoliberal establishment in Latin America" (44). At the same time, French overlooks the fact that there is a radical case for distinguishing between the new left regimes; focusing on their alleged anti-neoliberal credentials may obfuscate the extent to which many have actually accommodated the neoliberal model. If simple binaries do not suffice, many contributors still see the value of classifying the left regimes according to some combination of normative and descriptive criteria. Luis Reygadas and Fernando

[2] The former camp includes Brazil, Uruguay and Chile; the latter, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina and Nicaragua.

Filgueira offer a particularly interesting analysis of the social policies of the new left regimes, distinguishing between three dominant strategies: liberal, social democratic and radical populist. Although each regime has implemented policies that reflect all three strategies, Chile and Venezuela are representative of opposite ends of a continuum from liberalism to radical populism.

On the origins of the left turns, Reygadas and Filgueira provide a helpful way of situating the "pink tide" regionally and historically not just in terms of the failure of neoliberalism, but liberalism more broadly. They argue that the left turns can be viewed as a "second incorporation crisis" of liberalism, paralleling an earlier crisis of the 1940s and 1950s when demands for greater equality and inclusion by peasants, labourers and the middle class led to increased political enfranchisement, new forms of redistribution and a greater commitment to national development under import-substitution (ISI). The authoritarian dictatorships of the 1970s reversed the tendency towards greater inclusion and diminishing inequality. The third wave transitions re-democratized the political space, though, as Cameron, Hershberg and Beasley-Murray remind us, their conservative nature placed basic questions on how to deal with social cleavages and inequalities outside the agenda for public contestation. Liberalism, once again, proved insufficient in Latin America, though it provided a path through which left parties came to power to expand democratic politics and the traditional republican ideal.

A chapter by Beasley-Murray goes furthest in theorizing how popular revolt by the "multitude" against not only neoliberalism but the entire postcolonial system of governance created the pressures for left governments to recreate the political order through constitution making in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In this sense, he asserts, "the 'left turns' continue to be about a conflict between the subterranean power of a constituent power that is closer to the surface than ever, and a constituted power that is more or less frantically trying to reinvent liberalism for these post-liberal times" (143). Although the concept of multitude – which, as in its original formulation by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, is amorphous and all-encompassing – tells us very little about how popular groups actually become organized collective actors, the juxtaposition of constituent and constituted power points to what's unique about Latin America's left turns.[3] For if, as the editors rightly assert, constitution making is always about power struggles to "constitute" a new

[3] See Borón (2005) for a critique of Hardt and Negri's use of the concept in their work, *Empire*.

constitutional order that reshapes the power, participation and interests favoured by the older order, a significant feature of the left turns is that its pursuing its agenda by changing the basic legal structure rather than revolt, violence or revolution. Among other things, this means that new leaders find themselves bound by the rule of law under new constitutions and restricted in their arbitrary use of power.

Arditi's chapter on post-liberalism thus reminds us that the left's historical itinerary from insurrectional to electoral politics is partially rooted in the defeats of the past. The unexpected effect of the string of military coups of the 1970s was that it prompted many political groups to reassess their misgivings about electoral democracy or to broaden their appeal beyond workers and the peasantry. As Cameron and Kenneth Sharpe argue in a chapter on constituent power and constitution making in the Andes, however, this approach poses a dilemma insofar as the left must negotiate with other political forces – whatever their ideology – that retain electoral resources and legitimacy. The focus on constituent power is but one example of how *Latin America's Left Turns* grapples with the tension between democracy and social change. Chapters on Bolivia and Venezuela (discussed below) delve further into the issue, providing a solid defence of the more radical elements of the left turns against standard liberal criticisms.

Latin America's Left Turns provides an important point of departure into developing a social democratic political theory of Latin America's new left. However – perhaps in part because it seems intended to convince liberal critics of the democratic credentials of the new left – it is lacking in a critical engagement with the limitations of the left turns from a radical perspective. This is not to say that contributors are unaware of the limitations of the new left when it comes to matters of social change. From the outset, the editors themselves note that "nowhere is the left pursuing a radical statist project that is inimical to the interests of the business community as a whole" (9). They further warn that social democracy in the current conjuncture may once again amount to another inadequate incarnation of liberalism. And yet, a more sustained analysis of class relations and the political economic structure of the region under the new left is missing. Indeed, the section on political economy provides important analysis of policy issues such as Reygadas and Filgueira's exploration of social policy, but a deeper structural analysis is conspicuously lacking.

Moreover, although some contributors examine issues of culture by touching on the indigenous-led pluri-national visions being articulated as alternatives to liberalism, there is little attempt to examine the interaction

of different social relations of power. This is particularly apparent in terms of gender relations, which are scarcely mentioned. A feminist analysis of the new Latin American left in terms of public policy issues would have rounded out the collection.[4]

Challenging Neoliberalism and *What's Left in Latin America* provide a deeper theorization of the mobilization of social movements, the development of social power through collective action and the limitations of the centre and centre-left regimes. They diverge considerably, however, with respect to their assessment of the relationship between democracy and social change. The authors of both books situate their analysis of the crisis of neoliberalism within a larger critique of capitalism. Both invoke Karl Polanyi's critique of market society as a specific brand of capitalism which engenders its own opposition as political, cultural, and social life are subjugated to the logic of the market. Drawing upon the concept of the "double movement," they examine how the governments that came to power in the wake of the democratic transitions – most of which implemented neoliberal reforms after campaigning on anti-neoliberal platforms (covered in depth by Silva) – encountered growing resistance by social movements and organized labour. Silva focuses on the experiences of Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Argentina, devoting a final chapter to Peru and Chile to explore the factors that led to the stabilization of neoliberalism in both of those countries. Petras and Veltmeyer examine Bolivia, Argentina, Venezuela and Cuba, with the latter two presented as legitimate leftist alternatives in the region notwithstanding their own internal tensions and contradictions.

Petras and Veltmeyer, however, also frame their analysis within an explicitly historical materialist framework, situating Latin America's regional political economy within a classic statement on class exploitation and the contradictions of capitalism. They draw upon a wealth of economic statistics, much of it from United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC or CEPAL by its Spanish acronym), to make their case. Their analysis of the current conjuncture builds upon a critical engagement with social movements over three years of field research.[5] They are not unconcerned with the multiple forms that

[4] Unfortunately, few comparative accounts of Latin America's left turns from a feminist perspective have been undertaken. Friedman's (2009) insightful critique of the left regimes in Brazil, Bolivia, Chile and Venezuela and gender issues is a notable exception.

[5] It should be noted that the authors state in the introduction that their work is based on recurrent visits and close study over the "past three years" (1). The back cover, however,

exploitation and domination take, though there is little question that class is prioritized as the only cross cutting social relation around which a larger socialist project must be articulated. Above all, they emphasize the importance of class struggle, political power and a class conscious leadership in determining the success of radical change.

Silva, for his part, develops a Marxian-Weberian theory of power as a relational category with economic, political, ideological, and military dimensions. Interweaving elements of class-analysis, historical-sociology, and new social movement theory to theorize the nature of the social movements and their relationship to the state, he masterfully traces the growth of resistance to neoliberalism in each country from "relatively self-contained early streams of protest into ever-stronger rivers of mobilization." The framework of the contentious politics literature is deployed to examine how the waves of revolt expanded as movements formed on the basis of "associational" and "collective power" integrated their specific grievances against the state within a larger critique of neoliberalism.[6] Most of the analysis is based on secondary sources with considerable use of newspaper articles to identify key events.

Despite his broad conception of power, Silva focuses primarily on its structural and institutional dimensions – his account conspicuously fails to include a theorization of patriarchy and cultural domination as being both a part of and separate from class exploitation. That being said, his examination of the material dimensions of contention, particularly in terms of how the "repertoire of contention" shifted across waves of protest, is no less insightful. He argues that opposition at the point of production in the workplace by labour became increasingly overshadowed by the role of newly unemployed workers in leading anti-neoliberal contention in the

notes that the book is based on "five years of field research." This is unfortunately but one example of the poor editing that characterizes the work. Indeed, for many scholars, the book will be difficult to read, not because of its analysis – which is in places questionable – but because of its many typographical errors, spelling inconsistencies and missing sentences. One particularly vexing example is the inconsistent spelling used for the name of the Vice President of Bolivia. In some places, he is identified correctly as García Linera; elsewhere, however, the Vice President becomes García Lineres. Such a criticism would be petty were it not for the omnipresence of the errors and – in the case of Linera – the vehemence with which he is consistently attacked.

[6] The deployment of "brokerage mechanisms" to produce nodes of contact linking previously unconnected movements and "cognitive mechanisms" to consolidate an integrated critique of neoliberalism are described in some detail, along with other meso-level tactics in the "repertoire of contention."

streets as de-unionization and de-industrialization eroded collective labour power. By the second-generation of neoliberal reform of the 1990s, unemployed workers occupied a primary place among the multiple social movements which increasingly acted in concert both together and with organized labour. The *piqueteros* – who first captured the imagination of the new Latin American left as the movement began to organize in Argentina – became the new paradigm of anti-capitalist contention. Their most visible tactic centred on a strategy of disrupting exchange networks governing the circulation of vital commodities such as raw energy through the erection of roadblocks. Workers remained a primary force of anti-neoliberal contention, however, as testified by the wave of takeovers and occupations that swept Argentina at the apex of the crisis of the neoliberal state in the early 2000s.

In terms of the character of the new left regimes, *What's Left* provides a detailed critique which constitutes the work's main contribution. Petras and Veltmeyer's central criticism is that the centre-left governments have deepened a dependent-structure of accumulation in the world capitalist economy that privileges the interests of the agro-mineral oligarchy over the peasantry and urban working class. With the exception of Venezuela, which has begun to challenge the traditional power of capital, the centre-left has pursued the modest social policy of the post-Washington Consensus without altering the underlying structure of the neoliberal economy – inequality, they argue, has in fact increased almost everywhere. The agro-export model of accumulation – driven in large part by China and India's insatiable appetite for commodities which has (temporarily?) reversed the traditional terms of trade in the world market and provided the surplus required to finance social programs – has given rise to new social contradictions and paradoxes. Timid land reforms and other reformist measures by the left governments have done little to address the poverty and dispossession of the peasantry. Meanwhile, the growing economic power of the dominant classes through the commodity booms has led to a resurgence in the political power of the right while left governments have actively demobilized the social movements.

Although Brazil is only referred to tangentially throughout the book, for Petras and Veltmeyer the government of Lula da Silva and the Worker's Party (PT) exemplifies the treachery of the social democratic left: "Lula's PT regime," they write, "which came to office with the powerful backing of the trade unions, the MST (landless peasants movement), public sector unions and popular social movements, has become the leader of the resurgent, elite-led agro-export movement" (23). Indeed, under Lula's

government, social movements have suffered criminalization, the agro-bourgeoisie has vastly expanded and the bankers remain firmly in charge of financial policy. And yet, Brazil is one of the only countries where inequality has diminished - as Petras and Veltmeyer themselves concede. A closer look at the strengths and weaknesses of Lula's social policy in the ongoing context of neoliberal economics would have buttressed their case on the limitations of the post-Washington Consensus (a major shortcoming of all 3 works under review is that they fail to provide a detailed analysis of the Brazilian case, though Reygadas and Filgueira's chapter on social policy in *Latin America's Left Turns* does include Brazil in its analysis).

For Petras and Veltmeyer, there is no question that the limitations of the centre-left regimes can be traced to the acceptance of the social movements of the electoral path as the main strategy to achieve their objectives. The acceptance of this strategy led to a failure to seize the initiative presented by a unique revolutionary epoch characterized by a favourable accumulation of class power. Based on more than forty years of observation and engagement with the Latin American left, they argue that the electoral path in the absence of a sustained commitment to insurrectionary tactics can only lead to demobilization, disappointment and co-optation of radical leaders. "Parliamentary politics," they argue, "creates powerful spiritual and material inducements, status and income that inhibit the re-radicalization of ex-movement parliamentarians" (218). Silva provides a different assessment. He echoes sentiments from the earlier literature on democratization that social change is contingent upon the broad acceptance of the left of the principles of liberal democracy. According to his analysis, the closing of associational space as a result of revolutionary threats in Peru and Chile explains why both countries have produced more stable neoliberal orders.[7]

For Petras and Veltmeyer, the de-radicalization of the left is all the more lamentable given that it has coincided with the declining ability of the US to intervene. They attribute the decline of US power in the region to both structural changes in the regional economy and the massive diversion of US resources to the Middle East. In terms of the former, growing trade relations with Europe and Asia in conjunction with expanding domestic markets has led to a decoupling of the Latin American economies from the

[7] In the former, the Fujimori government shut down associational space across civil society in the name of the war against the Shining Path; in the latter, the Pinochet regime quashed a resurgent revolutionary movement in the early 1980s, paving the way for a very conservative democratic transition.

United States. This has coincided with the loss of influence of the IMF and the World Bank. The paradox, however, is that neoliberalism is now being driven endogenously by the very regimes which came to power opposing it.

Not surprisingly, they are critical of regional integration initiatives such as Mercosur, which have incorporated the same neoliberal logic as the failed US and Canadian-led Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Their pessimism concerning the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), however, is a departure for most left analyses, though it is hard to disagree with their assessment that it remains an association of marginal states in which trade flows are largely from Venezuela to the weaker economies (with the partial exception of Petras and Veltmeyer, none of the authors discuss regional integration in any depth).

In terms of their analyses of specific countries, *What's Left* and *Challenging Neoliberalism* offer similar appraisals of Argentina and Venezuela but diverge in their treatment of Bolivia. Both are critical of the Kirchner governments in Argentina for re-establishing clientelistic relations with labour by the party machinery, though Silva is predictably more forgiving than Petras and Veltmeyer. Silva attributes the limitations of the left in Argentina to the failure of the *piqueteros* and organized labour to move beyond temporary conjunctural alliances to forge long-term collective power. For Petras and Veltmeyer, the inability of the popular movement to articulate an alternative to the re-imposition of "normal capitalism" by the Kirchners was rooted in the spontaneous, mass, autonomous character of the *piquetero* movement, which lacked the political power and national leadership to develop a class conscious workers movement.

Yet if collective power and workers' consciousness are required for social change, the Venezuelan experience indicates that they can be developed and consolidated by a charismatic leader after an electoral victory. Neither book explores this point in any depth, though both acknowledge the centrality of Chávez's leadership in directing structural change from above. Indeed, collective power was only forged by the state after Chávez's Bolivarian revolution began creating new institutional spaces for the social movements and popular participation such as the community councils.[8] Prior to this, the regular episodes of contention that

[8] Likewise, Silva argues that in Ecuador the presidential victory of the anti-neoliberal technocrat, Rafael Correa, was based on popular electoral support in the absence of collective power, which has limited the radical potential of the government.

swept Venezuela in the 1990s failed to coalesce a unified, coordinated anti-neoliberal movement against the state, which, as Silva argues, managed confrontation with labour by maintaining elements of the national-popular compromise. Both books thus apply a theoretical double standard in accounting for the failure of leftist change in one country by invoking a factor that was in fact absent in the success of another. Clearly, the constellation of factors that drive meaningful social change are more historically contingent and indeterminate than both a traditional Marxist analysis (which is not to dismiss Petras and Veltmeyer's assessment as praxis) and a contentious politics approach would allow.

The failure to confront the centrality of leadership in driving Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution leads both books to dismiss or ignore concerns about the centralization of executive power. For Silva, Chávez's embrace of electoral politics and acceptance of liberal democratic norms is sufficient to dispel any concerns on the arbitrariness of the revolutionary process. For Petras and Veltmeyer, the only relevant issue is whether state power is being used to affect a process of radical transformation. Despite serious challenges and limitations, they argue that, ultimately, it is. As Jennifer McCoy argues in a chapter of *Latin America's Left Turns*, however, "chavismo has produced a system dependent on the popularity, charisma and visions of a single individual" (98). While much of McCoy's liberal-inspired critique has little merit (see Cameron and Sharpe's counter argument), thoughtful radical intellectuals such as Margarita López Maya (2007) have raised concerns on how executive centralism may undermine the sustainability of the Bolivarian Revolution and weaken the autonomy of social movements. If the analysis is debatable, the critique must be taken seriously given the history of authoritarianism that has all too often characterized socialist regimes.

Silva comes down on the opposite side of the debate than Petras and Veltmeyer in his interpretation of social change in Bolivia. For Silva, the MAS-led process of social change is grandly theorized as a "reformist leftward decommodifying swing of Polanyi's double movement of capitalism." He is particularly enthusiastic about the democratic means through which this process of change has been accomplished. The outcome of this analysis is that he evades the question of how far structural change is possible in the absence of a more confrontational approach with dominant capital. For Petras and Veltmeyer, however, the MAS abandoned its radical indigenous roots when it embarked upon a strategy of class compromise and electoral politics. Rather than seize the opportunity for a revolutionary assault on power that the mobilization of the indigenous-

peasant movement provided in the wake of the Gas Wars, the MAS chose to expand its electoral base by appealing to the urban-based petty-bourgeoisie and middle-class Mestizo intellectuals. With socialism on the backburner, the party has substituted real structural transformation with populist policies and symbolic cultural politics. Worse, it has adopted an accommodationist approach towards the white agro-export elite in the eastern half of the country, which has regrouped politically and gained renewed autonomy. The MAS' project of Andean capitalism has offered little more than a palliative to the poor while the structural power of the oligarchy has in fact increased.

Although Petras and Veltmeyer develop their critique on strong foundations, argumentative rigour at times takes a backseat to simplistic ideological attacks on the party leadership. The limited assertion of national control over key resources, the populist character of social policy and the misguided compromises with the opposition are all issues worthy of central attention when evaluating the MAS' commitment to structural transformation. Yet, there is more to the party's redistributive and cultural politics then the authors are willing to admit, and its attempts at improving the material lives of the indigenous majority while legitimating and institutionalizing its political practices through a process of decolonization is no modest feat. Indeed, the authors fail to engage with the vast literature on Bolivia which discusses these challenges, much of it radical and not entirely uncritical.[9] A more insightful analysis of the MAS is offered by Santiago Anria in *Latin America's Left Turns*, which, while acknowledging much of the radical critique, situates the limitations of the party historically in terms of the challenges associated with articulating new organizational practices and spaces in the cities. If the MAS' expansion into the urban areas was critical for winning government and ensuing governability, it unfortunately replicated many of the top-down client-patron schemes of participation inherited from older political parties.

A chapter on Cuba betrays the authors' ideological double standards, though it still manages to be one of the most insightful in *What's Left*. The long list of shortcomings of the Cuban revolution are systematically revealed: the ongoing dependence on agro-exports and tourism since the Special Period; the decline in local food production; the neglect of the housing sector; the inadequate transport system; the growth of a lumpenproletariat; and, perhaps most importantly, the growing

[9] See the July edition of *Latin American Perspectives* (2010, Vol. 37, No. 4) for a recent collection of essays on Bolivia with different viewpoints from various radical scholars.

contradiction between a highly educated work force and the lack of a sufficiently diversified economy to provide meaningful employment. Low wages, weak motivation and a lack of worker discipline characterize an economy over which workers seem to exercise little control. With all of its blemishes, it is at times unclear what lessons the Revolution actually has to offer the new Latin American left. The best argument Petras and Veltmeyer can muster in its favour is that Cuba has enjoyed higher levels of human development (an admittedly odd indicator of the vitality of socialism for a Marxist interpretation) than low-income capitalist countries. The authors fail to question why, after fifty years of socialism, worker control over the production process is so minimal. Nor do they analyze the extent to which the political system offers real channels for mass democratic participation. Whatever its social accomplishments – and there is no question that these are considerable and merit a vigorous defence on the part of the left – Cuba continues to exemplify the undemocratic features of political and economic governance that have unfortunately been all too common to actually-existing socialist regimes.

Yet, the challenges of creating socialism in Cuba should not distract from its ongoing necessity. The persistence and deepening of inequality under social democratic regimes indicates that the contradictions of capitalism are alive and well, and that the struggles intended to democratize both politics and the economy will not succeed in the absence of a radical alternative vision of society. Petras and Veltmeyer identify important lessons of the past and present, including the ongoing importance of nationalizing key sectors and the commanding heights of the economy to implement socialism while undercutting the power base of the oligarchs (they also note that controlling investment is central to containing inflation). Venezuela has made more progress than others in this regard, but nationalization must be expanded and followed by socialization. Just as importantly, the Cuban experience underscores the importance of deepening democratic control of the economy. While Petras and Veltmeyer are highly critical of current market-driven reforms, they assert that Cuba was right to re-introduce a small private sector – distinct from capitalist enterprise – in local markets. This is also an important lesson of managing a viable socialist economy.

Progressive scholars will undoubtedly find much of value in the three books reviewed here. Each helps to illuminate key questions on the nature of the new left regimes, the social movements that brought them to power, their policies, politics and possible trajectories. Several chapters in *Latin America's Left Turns* provide a formidable defence of the new left

regimes, legitimizing the democratic aspirations that have animated the popular struggles to reconstitute power as a result of the inadequacies of both liberalism and neoliberalism. Where the collection falls short, however, is in its failure to offer a political economy of the region that reveals the underlying structural contradictions that continue to define it. Petras and Veltmeyer's contribution lies precisely in their ability to identify the structural contradictions and paradoxes of the regional political economy, and to take the new left regimes to task for not confronting them. Their failure to consider the importance of electoral democracy in light of the authoritarianism of the past, however, is a serious shortcoming. Silva, for his part, provides a holistic framework for analyzing power relations in Latin America and for deciphering the factors that lead to the emergence, success and failures of collective actors on the political scene. At the same time, Silva reproduces the same oversight as the other contributions in failing to pay sufficient attention to the gender dynamics of the left turns despite his broader conception of power.

From the perspective of socialist inquiry and praxis, the debate on the relationship between liberal democracy and socialism (or the transition to socialism) in Latin America's current conjuncture merits a deeper consideration than any one of these contributions provides. There is an argument to be made that the left now, as much as ever, needs to reaffirm its commitment to democratic values (including elements of the liberal republican tradition) on both tactical and ethical grounds. Liberal democratic norms should be upheld and expanded where the left is not confronting dictatorship. This is not to rule out extra-legal tactics on the part of popular actors, but to insist upon ultimately achieving structural change at the ballot box. The rise of a new right willing to reproduce the violent tactics of the old - a tendency most tragically illustrated through the coup in Honduras in 2009 - reaffirms the lesson of the dark days of the dictatorship that the left must champion democracy as the only legitimate political regime. One of the more important developments in terms of Latin American integration not discussed by any of the authors is the rise of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), which has acted as a bulwark against reactionary social forces both in Bolivia – where it has unambiguously supported the Morales government against the forces of reaction in the *media luna* – and Honduras. The socialist left must embrace this new political sensibility.

In the absence of a more vigorous intellectual defence of the values of democracy, the left opens the way for right-wing authoritarians to act undemocratically in the name of restoring democracy. Overlooking the

issue further leaves the defence of democracy to the dogmatisms of liberal democrats, who excel at misrepresenting and de-contextualizing many of the left's actions. The lacklustre (and sometimes, horrifying) experience of actually-existing socialism with regard to democracy – liberal, participatory or otherwise – indicates that electoral politics and liberal democratic institutions should not be dismissed so cavalierly. The new left regimes need to be criticized no less than the old, but the critique should focus on finding solutions to building popular hegemony and power within a democratic framework.

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