

# The Crisis of the Latin American Left: A Marxist Account



Jeffery R. Webber. *The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2017. 327 pages. Index. Tables.

Beginning in the late 1990s the Pink Tide began to roll in across much of South America, bringing to power elected leftist governments in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela. While these administrations were not all the same—Argentina and Brazil appeared to be more social democratic and Bolivia and Venezuela more radical—they represented a new moment in the history of the Latin American Left.

Unlike Cuba in 1959 and Nicaragua in 1979, these governments did not have their origins in revolutionary guerrilla movements; they were the result of tumultuous social movements of workers, peasants, the indigenous, and the urban poor had given rise to new political parties, or set new directions to old parties, that won power through elections.

If many of the political parties that took power had charismatic leaders they were not—with the exception of Hugo Chávez—the military *caudillos* of earlier times, such as

General Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico in the 1930s and General Juan Perón in Argentina in the 1950s. Some of the new leaders, of course, were politicians, like Nestor Kirchner and Kristina Fernández de Kirchner both president of Argentina and President Rafael Correa of Ecuador. But others put a new face on the Left. Brazilian president Lula, Luiz Inácio da Silva, had been a factory worker. Bolivian President Evo Morales was an indigenous coca farmer and organizer of peasant unions. And Chilean President Michel Bachelet, was a former leftist who had been tortured and exiled, returned home, became a physician, married, had three children, separated from her husband, became a politician and won the presidency.

While there were significant differences in the experiences of these governments and the dynamic movements in their countries, one can say that for more than a decade they expanded democracy, extended the systems of social welfare, and in a period of economic expansion distributed more of the nation's wealth to working people and the poor than in the past. While Communism had collapsed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to be succeeded in many cases by conservative and authoritarian governments, and while European Social Democracy had given up on the universal welfare state and taken up neoliberalism and austerity, South America appeared to be the one region moving in a progressive direction. In Venezuela, arguably the most radical of the South American governments, Hugo Chávez proclaimed that he and his allies on the left were fighting for "twenty-first century socialism." Even the 2008 Great Recession that paralyzed in North America and Europe did not have an impact on South America—until 2010.

Then suddenly South America economies began to contract while the Leftist governments began to tremble and then to tumble. The tide began to go out. At the same time, it became apparent that while there had been significant democratic reforms, important social programs for the poor, and greater opportunity for all in expanding economies, the fundamental

structure of the capitalist state and economy had remained in place, while state bureaucracies that thrived on corruption, and politicians and opportunistic political parties flourished. We watched in shock as Lula's handpicked successor Dilma Rousseff of the Workers Party was impeached and removed from office in May of 2016.

### **What had happened?**

Why had the Pink Tide governments apparently been so successful for more than a decade and then suddenly gone into crisis, with rightwing forces driving the left from power in Argentina and Brazil and now looking to do so in Venezuela? It is those questions that Jeffery R. Webber seeks to answer in his book *The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left*, a collection of essays dealing with Bolivia, Chile, and Venezuela in particular, but also providing a survey of developments across much of the continent.

Webber, who teaches politics and international relations at Queen Mary, University of London and is the author of several books on Latin America, has given us in this one a collection of essays that while discussing several South American left governments focuses its attention on Bolivia and Venezuela. His Marxist analysis, informed by a grasp not only of the extensive literature on contemporary Latin American politics but also firsthand experience of many of the continent's social movements, offers a complex and subtle analysis the rise to power and then the crisis of these leftist governments, parties, and societies. At the risk of oversimplification, his thesis is this: The leaders of the various left governments—but particularly Morales and Chávez—proved able to manage difficult and turbulent relationships between the state and the social movements while also renegotiating relations with the capitalist class, and in the case of Morales even overseeing the reconstitution of the national bourgeoisie, but they could do so only as long as the

prosperity based on rising commodity prices due to the expansion of China lasted.

Each of the half dozen cases mentioned in the book was different of course, but the trajectory was generally the same. These governments, riding the rising tide of worker, peasant, indigenous, and poor peoples' movements often used leftist language and talked of "socialism," but their shrewd populist leaders took advantage of the prosperous times to realign relations between the government, international capital, large-scale national capital, a rising petty bourgeoisie, and even indigenous small business. While Bolivia nationalized power companies and Venezuela renationalized the state steel company, in general the left governments left finance, industry, and agriculture in private hands while at the same time encouraging those extractive export industries that prospered from rising commodity prices, largely due to China's spectacular growth. Interestingly, while the economy expanded, some of these countries actually saw a reduction in the industrial manufacturing sector. Rising profits and taxes provided the wherewithal for the creation of health, education, and social welfare programs that benefited the poor. Once established in power, however, the Pink Tide governments generally strove to divide the very social groups that had put them there and worked to demobilize those movements, and in some cases, such as Ecuador, systematically repressed opposition, imprisoning its leaders. I put all of this in cruder terms than Webber does, but I think this is a fair summary of his views.

### **Gramsci's "Passive Revolution"**

Webber's preferred theoretical framework for explaining these complicated developments is Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution," as interpreted by Adam David Morton, author of *Revolution and State in Modern Mexico: The Political Economy of Uneven Development* (2014) and Italian-Mexican theorist Massimo Modonesi, author of *Subalternity*,

*Antagonism, Autonomy: Constructing the Political Subject* (2014). (One should say that while not often mentioned, Leon Trotsky's intellectual ghost seems ever present in these pages.)

Gramsci had used the "passive revolution" term to discuss fascism, while Morton found it useful in understanding the rise of the modern Mexican state. The notion is that the problems of combined and uneven development under capitalism lead to situations in which there is a "revolutionary" rupture with the old regime, but also a "restoration" of bourgeois class relations. (Here I am paraphrasing Morton, *Revolution and State*, p. 4) So Webber in his essays in this book (as he has in others) uses the term "passive revolution" to explain the changes in the Bolivia of Evo Morales, sometimes with help as well of Bolivian intellectuals such as Luis Tapia (author of *El estado de derecho como tiranía* – The Rule of Law as Tyranny), and generally inspired by the twentieth-century Bolivian and Peruvian Marxists respectively René Zavaleta Mercado and José Carlos Mariátegui. So, for Webber, Morales, a leader of indigenous farmers' movements, can break with the old *criollo* order, while broadening the base of Bolivian capitalism, and renegotiating its place in the world capitalist order. Webber's explanation is compelling, especially for Bolivia, but also sheds light on critical situations from Brazil to Venezuela.

Webber does a lot of things in this book, and most of them very well. Those interested in anarchist theory will be intrigued by his appreciative Marxist critique of George Ciccariello-Maher's *We Created Chávez*. Personally, I find his attempt to use Mariátegui's "romantic Marxism" to criticize Álvaro García Linera, Evo Morales' "Marxist" apologist, to be a stretch. His short essay on Chile's new left is very nice, while his chapter on agrarian capitalism in Bolivia's east will be tedious for all but the experts. In some of his essays, Webber provides fascinating short biographies and some words from a

grassroots activists, but attributes to them more explanatory power than I see in them. Still, whatever my particular appreciations, which are partly a matter of intellectual taste, one might say, this is a very useful book indeed.

Today, with many of these states in profound economic and political crises, Webber's new book, most accessible for Latin American specialists and those interested in leftist political theory, provides us with a guide to understanding the challenges and in some cases the catastrophes they face today. Professors of Latin American studies will want to use this in their graduate seminars, as I am this fall, while those interested in contemporary Latin American situation or in the application of Marxist political theory to actual contemporary situations will find this book to be stimulating.