

In Latin America: A New Left, A New Marxism?

February 3, 2018



*This is an excerpt from Webber's article **From Nuestra América to Abya Yala: Notes on Imperialism and Anti-imperialism in Latin America across Centuries** in the newest issue of **Viewpoint**.*

The richness of the extra-parliamentary cycle of revolt, and the contradictions of subsequent left-government rule, unsurprisingly spurred a new period of Latin American Marxism (2000-). It is perhaps imprudent to make summative judgements on key features of the theory and praxis generated thus far, and assuredly over hasty to determine whether the phase of Marxism begun in 2000 is drawing to a close in tandem with the end of the political cycle of the latest Left turn. But one tentative conclusion might be hazarded - the latest season of Latin American Marxism has been characterized by the kind of bursts of originality and profundity last witnessed after the Cuban Revolution, and, at the same time, signs of sclerotic rigidity and formulaic dogma that preceded it. Winds of transformation and restoration wrestled each other indeterminately through this latest storm of the region's Left.

Some of the intellectual highs and lows are visible in the outpouring of recent works on imperialism and anti-imperialism. We can document such polarities, at least in a preliminary fashion, through a comparative juxtaposition of recent work by two of the region's weightiest theoreticians: Atilio Borón and Claudio Katz, both highly acclaimed Argentine Marxists. What is most striking in examining their distinct treatments of contemporary imperialism and anti-imperialism are their different theorizations of the relationship between capitalism and imperialism. Borón, on the one hand, implicitly absorbs a number of Realist axioms from orthodox academic debates in North American International Relations, the most important being the near-total separation of the sphere of "geopolitics" from the laws of motion of capital accumulation as they unfold unevenly in and through the world market. This is not merely a heuristic separation for analytical purposes in Borón's analysis, but purports to document a real separation. Thus a window is opened to hyper-contingent and, at times, conspiracist readings of U.S. domination and its ostensible decline over the

last few decades. For Katz, by contrast, the economic and the political are often out of sync in their specific temporalities, but there is nonetheless always a dialectical relation between the two. A better balance between objective determination and historical contingency is thus possible in this framework. Capitalist dynamics running through the world market over different phases of capitalist development internationally are understood to set limits on political maneuver for the asymmetrically positioned, constitutive parts of the totality. The same capitalist dynamics contain internal contradiction, and tend toward recurrent systemic crises, potentially opening up political opportunities.

América Latina en la geopolítica del imperialismo, by Borón, is perhaps the most eminent contribution to the latest wave of work in this area.⁵¹ The book received a conspicuous boost in stature when it won the 2012 Premio Libertador al Pensamiento Crítico prize, established in 2005 by Hugo Chávez, and administered by the *Red de Intelectuales, Artistas y Movimientos Sociales en Defensa de la Humanidad* (Network of Intellectuals, Artists, and Social Movements in Defence of Humanity).

Audacious in ambition, Borón's panoramic vision in this text moves in and out of broad theoretical controversies – classical and contemporary – and the concrete historical and political terrains of Latin America. He surveys classical questions of Marxist imperialist theory since the late 19th century and offers a novel synthetic framework for understanding the present machinations of global geopolitics. On that backdrop, Borón makes a first foray into more concrete analytical claims surrounding the general crisis of capitalism that erupted in 2007–08 and the questions it posed and poses for the apogee or decline of American empire. Regarding Latin America, he tracks the strategic centrality of the region in U.S. foreign affairs, from the Monroe Doctrine of the early 19th century to the Free Trade Area of the Americas initiative in the early 21st. This explains, for Borón, why the intensified militarization of American power around the globe includes an impressive tentacular reach – through military bases, covert operations, joint military exercises, and the “war on drugs” – into Mexico, across Central America, and throughout parts of South America.

A series of interwoven thematics are at the center of Borón's account: the question of natural resources, both as a strategic motivation for U.S. intervention and domination, but also as a source of debate and contestation between social movements and left-wing governments over the character of “extractivism” during the accelerated commodities boom of 2003–2011; the specificities of U.S. military extension into Latin America; the difficulties of periodizing recent cycles of popular movements in the region and their relationship to anti-imperialist resistance; and tentative interpretive outlines of a “new epoch” of geopolitical politics on a world-scale.

Much of the book is anecdotal and patchily organized. Intellectuals of lesser renown could ill afford its breezily assertive style. Fundamental theoretical elements – relative U.S. decline, rise of the BRICS, progressive orientation and transformative potential of extant leftist regimes – are more opening gestures than elaborated theses, with internal inconsistencies and soft-spots for conspiracy. But the political conclusions resonate with the most “statist” inflections of Latin American Marxism in recent years – i.e. those closely aligned with governments in office. Leftist opponents of the intensification of extractive capitalism under progressive governments – Raúl Zibechi, Eduardo Gudynas, and Alberto Acosta especially – are caricatured and ridiculed, while indigenous critics of capitalist mining expansion are portrayed as naïve romantics – *pachamamistas* – in a section relying heavily on a sycophantic reading of recent writings of Bolivian Vice President, Álvaro García Linera.⁵²

In his strongest thread of argumentation, Borón offers a cartography of military expansion – the agreement between Barack Obama and Álvaro Uribe to establish seven new military bases in Colombia, the vigilant patrolling of the Caribbean basin by U.S. forces, the broad encircling of

Venezuela with U.S. military outposts – in the north, in Colombia, and the Dutch Antilles; in the south, bases in Paraguay; in the west, bases in Peru; in the east, those in Guyana, Surinam, and French Guyana.⁵³ He demonstrates how Plan Colombia, Plan Puebla-Panama, and Plan Mérida, among others, have enabled joint military exercises with local armed forces.⁵⁴ Borón also points out the expansion and decentralization of U.S. military bases in recent decades with the U.S. Southern Command's "forward operating locations," which are little more than specialized landing strips and crude accompanying infrastructures. With local communications facilities around these strips quickly enabled by the monumental network of U.S. satellites around the world, and the use of enormous C-17 Globemaster transport planes, what appear to be more or less empty sites could be retrofitted, Borón contends, with operational U.S. troops and tanks within hours in most parts of Latin America and the Caribbean.⁵⁵ Such insights into the military dimensions of imperialism, however, are underspecified in relation to the dynamics of global capitalism. In an unacknowledged echo of mainstream "realist" theories of North American International Relations theory, geopolitics for Borón appear frequently as a wholly distinct sphere. Each time economics seems poised to enter the analysis, the narrative short circuits back to diplomatic intrigue.

In a degrading turn, which dishonours his landmark early books, Borón lends credence in *América Latina en la geopolítica del imperialismo* to 9/11 truther theses in several discrete moments of his argument.⁵⁶ What accounts for sustained celebration of this book, nonetheless, is perhaps the easy ideological veil it offers the governments of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. All three processes are said to be advancing toward "a socialism of a new type," a description which for Borón is flexible enough to cover Vietnam and China, despite decades of capitalist restoration.⁵⁷ The state, so this thesis goes, remains in control and dominance over private capital in these countries, and thus they cannot be described accurately as capitalist. Such a perspective also allows Borón to accept as necessary the totality of market reforms introduced recently in Cuba.⁵⁸

The strategic political conclusions Borón draws from history are of a kind with his economic conceptualization of market socialism. From the Allende period in Chile, for example, we are to conclude that the activities of the "most intransigent and radicalized" sections of the Chilean Left, unwittingly and in spite of themselves, "converged" with the interests of imperialism and the domestic Right in the early 1970s, precipitating the 1973 Pinochet coup. This must not be allowed to happen again, he stresses, particularly in contemporary Bolivia, Ecuador, or Venezuela.⁵⁹ Allende's moderation was apparently a plausible exit for that conflictual period, had it not been for radicals to his Left. By contrast, the great historian of the Allende years, Peter Winn, contends that,

in Chile, it was the counterrevolutionaries – not the revolutionaries – who utilized political violence and state terror as a conscious strategy. In the face of this violent counterrevolution, the determination of Allende, the bulk of the Popular Unity to keep to the nonviolent road to socialism may have doomed that strategy to ultimate failure – and condemned Chile to suffer the darkest night of political violence in its history.⁶⁰

In the first version, Allende went too fast, reached out insufficiently to his Right, and did so because of the intransigence of the Chilean radical Left. In the second, Allende's excessive moderation, faith in leadership from above, trust in the established institutions of the capitalist state and the bourgeois opposition's commitment to democratic continuity, and especially his suspicion of unleashed capacities of those from below and to his Left, are what led to the preventable Pinochet disaster.

Doubling down on key analytical features of his book – the statist conception of socialism, the demonization and caricature of left-oppositional forces in Latin American countries with progressive

governments, and the tendency to radically reduce each Latin American conjuncture to the geopolitical expression of imperial power – Borón has more recently compared the 2017 elections in Ecuador to the Battle of Stalingrad, eschewed the possibility of independent left forces in Venezuela critical of Maduro, and interpreted Trump's arrival to the White House as the "end of the cycle" of neoliberalism, and thus an opportunity for progressive forces in Latin America.⁶¹

In Borón's theorization and historicization of imperialism, burdened by a geopolitician idealism, diplomatic positioning by state managers in the core of the world system is granted excessive explanatory power, as is, in terms of resistance, action by progressive state managers of certain Latin American states with centre-left or left administrations. These state managers become the privileged potential agents of emancipation. Class struggle from below is largely eclipsed, despite occasional gestures to the contrary. This eclipse is as true of Borón's treatment of the United States as it is of Latin America, and it is in part what allows him, finally, to wade into conspiracist waters.

Beneath the Empire of Capital

The two latest books by Claudio Katz are of incomparable sophistication, whatever their internal tensions and misfires. *Bajo el imperio del capital*, published in 2011, contributes to the latest period of international theorization of contemporary imperialism (drawing on debates in Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English), while *Neoliberalismo, neodesarrollismo, socialismo*, published at the end of 2016, links the wider imperial context to narrower political and economic debates surrounding the last 15 years of leftist experimentation in Latin America.⁶²

Perhaps the most consequential element in *Bajo el imperio del capital* is Katz's careful periodization and characterization of the distinct phases of imperialism since the late nineteenth century – classical (1880–1914); post-war (1945–1975); and neoliberal (1980s–present).⁶³ Drawing on the theorizations of Lenin, Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Hilferding⁶⁴ – at times overlapping, and at others competing – Katz characterizes the classical era as one of ferocious capitalist expansion, with private enterprises playing a protagonist role, in which peripheral territories still external to capitalist laws of accumulation were brought into the system's orbit through colonial conquest.⁶⁵

Here Katz scrutinizes the specificity of distinct modes of production and distinguishes his account from those historians who pay exclusive attention to the rise and decline of empires across centuries – from Rome to Great Britain – without cognizance of the dramatic dissimilarities of the domestic social relations underlying each expansionary state. Following Ellen Meiksins Wood's *Empire of Capital*, Katz stresses the analogous relationship between specific forms of domestic social relations and various forms of imperial rule.⁶⁶ History suggests that there has been a close association between both capitalist and non-capitalist societies, on the one hand, and their imperialisms, on the other. Non-capitalist colonial empires of the past – such as the feudal Portuguese and Spanish Empires in Latin America between the late 15th and early 19th centuries – like feudal lords in their relations with peasants, dominated territory and subjects through military conquest, often direct political rule, and therefore extensive extra-economic coercion; in contrast, capitalist imperialism "can exercise its rule by economic means, by manipulating the forces of the market, including the weapon of debt."⁶⁷ It is obvious, all the same, that capitalist imperialism continues to require coercive force. As Colin Mooers suggests, "force remains indispensable both to the achievement of market 'openness' where it does not yet exist and to securing ongoing compliance with the rights of capital."⁶⁸

Neoliberal capitalism, Katz stresses, witnessed the transformation of the old international division of labor through the internationalization of production and the modularization of global value chains. The systematic transfer of manufacturing activities toward Asia intensified competition and reduced

production costs.⁶⁹ Massive multinational corporations emerged as key agents in this process. However, contra theses of monopoly capital, the augmentation in size of companies is not synonymous with monopoly control or suppression of competition. Instead, capitalism systematically recreates competition and oligopoly in complementary forms through reciprocal recycling. At certain moments of intense inter-firm rivalry, specific companies introduce transitory forms of supremacy, but these cannot be maintained in the face of new competitive battles just around the corner. This dynamic, Katz insists, is constitutive of capitalism and will persist so long as this particular mode of production survives.⁷¹

Technologically, an information revolution has facilitated the various neoliberal mutations of capitalism, with the generalization of the use of computers in manufacturing and the financial and commercial management of mega-corporations. Radical innovation has increased productivity, cheapened transportation, and enlarged communications networks.⁷² However, the internationalization of capital has also enabled more rapid and total transmission of disequilibria in the global system – witness Japan in 1993; Mexico in 1994; Southeast Asia in 1997; Russia in 1998; the so-called dot-com bubble in 2000 in the United States; and Argentina in 2001. This list of regional precursors to the 2008 Great Recession is hardly exhaustive.⁷³

As in all earlier phases of capitalism, neoliberalism is based on competition and fierce economic rivalry between firms for control of markets. Yet, in the classical phase of imperialism a certain proportionality existed between economic and military rivalry, whereas in the post-war and neoliberal epochs this proximate relationship has been partially displaced and fractured through the military supremacy of the United States.⁷⁴ The present system of imperialism is sustained in part through American military intervention and a historically unprecedented global military presence and attendant capabilities.⁷⁵

At the same time, U.S. hegemony in the 21st century is much reduced relative to its near-absolute dominance in the first-half of the 20th century. The effectiveness of its military superiority is increasingly in doubt, as the fallout from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq partially demonstrate.⁷⁶ Part of the explanation for U.S. military belligerence in the neoliberal period, generally, and the temporally and geographically indefinite character of the “war on terror,” specifically, can be understood as a compensation for declining industrial competitiveness and productivity. In the present moment U.S. military power is employed in part to redress economic deterioration.⁷⁷ The United States must constantly reaffirm its global leadership through new wars, Katz insists, but the results of each war are impossible to anticipate, and the instrumentalization of each bloody conflict has become more difficult with the absence of compulsory conscription.⁷⁸

The great advantage of Katz’s framework relative to Borón’s is the attentiveness it affords to the underlying character of shifting epochs of capitalist development globally, alongside careful defence against crude economic determinism. Capitalist dynamics in the world system in different historical periods are never reduced to empty abstractions, as though they mechanically determined political outcomes. Katz, following Marx, rises from the abstract to the concrete as he introduces new, specific determinations and mediations across capitalist phases, as these determinations and mediations arise in different regions of the world, in different ways. Class struggle – from above, and from below, and within both dominant and dominated countries – features at the heart of Katz’s historical narrative and theoretical premises. Thus history is open, if not wide-open.