

The Limits of State-Centric Analysis of the Latin American Left

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In *The Impasse of the Latin American Left*, scholars Franck Gaudichaud, Massimo Mondonesi and Jeffrey R. Webber set out to “weave together an overarching portrait of the phenomenon of progressivism in twenty-first century Latin America” (5). This is an ambitious book. It attempts to periodize, set out a political-economic framework, and analyze intellectual currents and does so for a timespan of over two decades. It does this in a region of more than 650 million people in over forty countries and hundreds of Indigenous nations. Though this sprawling scope may be its greatest weakness, the book sometimes displays great clarity and a powerful synthesis of the politics in the region.

The Impasse of the Latin American Left begins with an exploration of the neoliberal state programs and the “plebian revolutions” that arose in their wake. This is what preceded the taking of state power by “progressive” governments, here focusing on Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador. All three authors have published previously on these countries, and it is clearly their area of expertise. Originally published in México in 2019, the English translation has been slightly updated, but fails to meaningfully interrogate the policies enacted by Andrés Manuel López Obrador in México, or consider key elections over the past couple of years, as in Chile, Honduras, and Colombia.

The authors characterize progressivism in Latin America as resulting from a “... plebian upsurge of popular rebellions [that] helped to usher in a crisis of neoliberal hegemony in the early 2000s, which eventually found formal political expression in a series of electoral victories for left as well as center-left parties” (5). This progressive political expression then became hegemonic in the region, but its composition was far from homogenous. *The Impasse of the Latin American Left* classifies this diversity as such: Brazil and Uruguay were “center-left, social-liberal;” Argentina and Nicaragua “left-wing populist;” Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador “oscillated between popular nationalism, anti-imperialism and neo-developmentalism;” while México and Colombia remained neoliberal and conservative (6). According to the authors, there were common progressive elements across governments that formed part of the so-called Pink Tide. They argue that “a shifting blend of co-optation, symbolic reward, and the institutionalization of movements characterized, to different extents, all the progressive experiences of this era” (6). They offer incisive critique of this impasse, citing the inability of progressive governments to make meaningful change due to the class structures of these societies.

The high period of progressivism, they write, took place in step with the commodities boom between 2003 and 2011, allowing for significant redistribution and poverty reduction tied to increased rents from extractive capitalism (7). But “few signs are evident of genuine advances having been made at the high mark of progressivism in the political realm” (6). The book goes into some detail analyzing the way progressive governments were able to increase revenues from (often expanded) extractivism, without “engaging in any ambitious project to increase taxes on the incomes and assets of the ruling classes” (38).

The Limits of Centering the Parliamentary Left

Gaudichaud, Mondonesi, and Webber rely heavily on the work of Argentine economist Cladio Katz to set up the importance of social, peasant, Indigenous, landless, and labor mobilizing in helping to break the neoliberal consensus, often through direct action, occupations, and large-scale protest: “The difficult relationship among popular movements, parties, the state, and progressive governments is key to understanding this period,” they write. “In general terms, we can see a moment in which numerous movements have been strongly institutionalized, and often a co-optation and bureaucratization of a considerable part of their leaders” (45).

The authors explore the gradual marginalization of the social movements that brought Evo Morales to power in 2004; the dislocation of Argentina’s *piquetero* movement; the split in the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina during Kirchner’s rule; and the division of labor under both Ignacio Lula de Silva and Hugo Chavez Frías. Perhaps most strikingly, in Rafael Correa’s Ecuador, the denunciation of social movements crystallized in a process of criminalization. “Don’t believe all the romantic environmentalists; whoever opposes the country’s development is a terrorist,” Correa stated on national TV in 2007 (48).

Impasse provides a useful synthesis of attempts to institutionalize elected progressives. South American governments marginalized, repressed, and even incarcerated unruly elected officials who refused to play along with deepening neoliberalism and the destruction wrought by extractivism (see also Salazar Lohman, 2016). The book positions movements as occurring before and leading up to the election of progressive governments, which might explain why it falls short in exploring the depth and scope of social movement organizing *during* progressive administrations and following successful election campaigns. This is not an uncommon problem in left writing about progressive governments. “If we take the time to examine the difficulty of making visible the lineages of non-state centric and anti-patriarchal struggles, we understand that it occurs not because of absence of experiences, but because of the repeated exercise in producing forgetting,” note Huáscar Salazar Lohman and Diego Castro in the introduction to their edited volume *América Latina en Tiempos Revueltos* (2021, p. 23).

A significant problem with *The Impasse of the Latin American Left* is that instead of developing a narrative that allows us to understand the balance of forces at play—especially forces to the left of governments that failed to put their most radical promises into practice—*Impasse* consistently relies on economic, parliamentary-focused explanations of political life. Under progressive governments, according to this book, social, Indigenous, campesino, student, and other movements traditionally associated with the left are explored only to the extent that they interact, support, or obstruct governance, but not as protagonists with their own emancipatory visions and practices.

In addition, the authors do little to tease out the anti-patriarchal content of struggles, or the often overtly heteropatriarchal tendencies of progressive governments. For example, feminist movements against violence and for reproductive rights emerged with a great deal of force in 2016 in the Southern Cone, spreading throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. These movements, which have deepened their revolutionary challenges to how time and labor are organized (Paley, 2022) are

given only superficial attention in *Impasse*.

Closing Ranks, Critically

While *Impasse* is astutely critical of progressive governments, the concrete gains they achieved, and the means they used to co-opt or marginalize movements, consistent threads of loyalty to this once hegemonic project also emerge. On a political level, this tension—how deep a critique of progressivism is warranted—runs throughout the book.

Early on, after an extensive discussion of the limits of progressive governments, the authors declare, “The task now is not only to think in terms of ‘post-neoliberalism’: more broadly, the end of the present crisis makes up part of the global crisis of capitalist civilization” (73). Readers might be surprised that the final chapter, which deals with critiques of progressivism, finds the authors charting a middle course between critics and supporters of progressivism. They see the period covered as one of “passive revolution,” or a “series of political projects that became significant but limited processes of transformation, with a conservative undercurrent, directed from above and by means of demobilizing and subalternizing political practices...” (129). This leads them to argue that progressive governments were in fact authentically “revolutionary” (130) in their anti-neoliberal redistributive social programs, but at the same time, conservative in how they controlled movements and failed to modify fundamental capitalist social, political, and economic relations.

Gaudichaud, Mondonesi, and Webber are critics of progressive leaders, but not partisans of autonomist, Indigenous, environmental, or feminist positions. Therein lies the tension. If the task of the present is to go beyond “post-neoliberalism” and take up the “global crisis of capitalist civilization,” it seems difficult to do so without taking these more radical positions seriously.

Impasse of the Latin American Left misses an opportunity to think seriously about the limits of the uprisings and movements that progressive governments helped neutralize. Unfortunately, instead, we find digressions such as: “By contrast, we must give an account of the limitations of the popular movements that enabled the processes of passive revolution to take place, which we can sum up, paraphrasing Gramsci, as sporadic, rudimentary, and inorganic subversivism without a unified popular project” (135). Certainly, there is room here for elaboration, and for the inclusion of the perspectives and an exploration of the practices of participants in social movements. The authors also argue that movements integrated willingly into the construction of progressive governments. This type of argument occludes the substantial numbers of individuals and collectives inside and outside these movements, who for years fought—and, in many cases, continue to fight—this very institutionalization.

For example, the 2019 political crisis in Bolivia—a signal moment in understanding the contradictions and continuity of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), state construction, and communal organizing under Evo Morales—is given only the most cursory treatment. Though the authors are careful to point out Morales’ errors, they blame a disorganized coalition of right-wing politicians, the police, and the army for the “*coup*.” There is no mention of broad based (and quickly co-opted) protests against election fraud, or of the power vacuum created by high level resignations by members of the MAS (see Paley, 2022b).

Apología and Reciclaje

Shifting to the present, Gaudichaud, Mondonesi, and Webber describe México’s entrance into progressive government under Obrador as ushering in a “notable drop in all forms of state repression” saying it is “still too early to determine how his administration will be at quelling the violence associated with the ‘War on Drugs’ in that county, but early signs are not promising” (66).

While somewhat optimistic, this statement may have passed muster in early 2019. By 2022, when the book was released in English, it was patently false.

During the first four years of his administration, López Obrador has presided over the continuation of the “security” strategy of his predecessors, with disastrous results. He has also expanded the role of the Secretary of National Defense into the construction and maintenance of civilian infrastructure, including four airports, various sections of the new train in the Yucatán peninsula, and the country’s ports. The imprecision of the authors in dealing with countries outside of their area of expertise may be connected to the evident influence of the work of elder scholars of the left, in particular, of the aforementioned Katz. Chapter two is based in large part on Katz’s *Neoliberalismo, Neodesarrollismo, Socialismo* (2016). Katz is part of a generation of non-Mexican left scholars who gave a wide berth to the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party’s (PRI) authoritarianism, in part due to the party’s continued relationship with Cuba and other internationalist gestures. *Impasse* recycles Katz’s politically conservative perspective on violence in México and elsewhere eliding state responsibility and instead suggesting “... youth have sought refuge in the burgeoning narco-economy, where they often end up contributing—in one sense or another—to soaring homicide statistics” (84). Perhaps it is worth examining Katz’s perspective on this in more detail. He writes: “The narco-economy has become a refuge of subsistence for [social] sectors who are pushed to the margins. The region has the highest homicide rates in the world. Criminality grows together with the social fracture and the obscene promotion of the consumption and pleasures that the wealthy enjoy” (Katz, 2016, 43).

Katz’s conclusions regarding the impacts and the motivations of the war on drugs show his distance from México, where—especially since the disappearance of forty-three students from the Ayotzinapa teacher training college in Guerrero in 2014—activists, victims, and social movements have highlighted state forces as central actor in the violence traced through hundreds of thousands of homicides, disappearances, and forced displacements. But Katz resorts to a familiar liberal script of victim blaming, wherein state forces are omitted and those on the margins—people who chose criminality in part due to a desire to climb socially— are responsible for the violence.

Impasse authors do not go as far as Katz in this regard, but the reflection of Gaudichaud, Mondonesi (who teaches at the National Autonomous University of México), and Webber on this issue and others are limited due to their overreliance on dated work done at great remove from México’s political context. This is even more surprising amid a growing body of critical interpretations about the violence in México that is being elaborated by journalists and authors working in English and Spanish.

The strongest moments of *Impasse of the Latin American Left* are also in some ways the weakest. An example of a strength becoming a weakness is the scope of the book. While the amount of material presented is impressive, obvious unfamiliarity with recent events and goings on in countries outside the realm of the authors’ expertise leads to unfortunate missteps.

The authors are astute, attentive, and experienced readers of Latin American politics and well-versed in critiques of Pink Tide governments and the literature on their limitations. However, too often the book centers the critiques while shearing them of their significance. Indigenous, environmental, anti-capitalist, and autonomist critiques of the progressive cycle find their way into the text, but an elaboration of their politics and theoretical presuppositions unfortunately does not.

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