

# Something's Happening in Latin America – A Review Essay



Steve Ellner, editor. *Latin America's Radical Left: Challenges and Complexities of Political Power in the Twenty-first Century*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2014. Notes. Index. Paper: \$29.95.

George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chavez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution*. Duke University Press, 2013. 352 pages. Notes. 17 photos and 1 map. Index.

*"There's somethin' happenin' here, What it is ain't exactly clear"* – Stephen Stills

With the Middle East in flames, NATO trying to start World War III in Ukraine while the European Union's economy stagnates, Africa torn by low-level wars, and China re-entering the world stage in an assertive manner, there's one region of the world that is relatively quiet: South America. (Oops—Obama just blew that by declaring Venezuela a "national security threat" to the US. But, never mind.) Yet some of the most interesting and far-reaching changes in the world are taking place in this region. And these two books are excellent entries into understanding current developments in the region.

*Latin America's Radical Left*, edited by Steve Ellner, is a collection of articles that examine developments especially in

Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Is this socialism, is it anti-neo-liberalism, is it social democracy: what is it? According to Roger Burbach, "Something new is afoot in Latin America. US hegemony is weakening while a new order is struggling to be born." He argues it is the quest for a socialist utopia.

This group of very experienced Latin Americanists has the tools and knowledge to provide unusually clear understandings of what is going on, and they convey it well. It is different than efforts to establish socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the Hemisphere, whether in Cuba, Chile or Nicaragua. It is very complex, with no simple answers. It varies considerably from the traditional Marxist view of the necessity for leadership by an industrial proletariat, and is very heterogeneous. It means there are no simple answers.

One of the things that gets discussed throughout the volume is a rejection of the differentiation among these countries between the "good left" and "bad left," an argument put forth by conservative Mexican intellectual, Jorge Castañeda. This is an effort to divide the governments of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela from those of Brazil and Chile. First, as shown in numerous articles in this collection, his is much too simplistic to understand what is going on. And, as the various authors show, it is wrong.

This collection certainly challenges the idea that there is one common approach to creating social change in the region, or that there are simple answers. These authors critically examine their respective countries, and seek to explain the complexities being addressed, while both giving credit to innovative initiatives and pointing out where the process of changes is limited or being short-changed. As Steve Ellner writes in his Introduction, "The chapters in this book focus on the distinguishing features of, and challenges confronting, the twenty-first-century Latin American radical left in

power. The book's basic thesis is that the obstacles and complexities arising from these experiences are quantitatively and qualitatively different from twentieth-century cases of leftist rule."

William I. Robinson, in his *Forward*, argues the importance of understanding what is currently taking place in Latin America: "Anyone who wants to understand the prospects for, and complexities of, transformational projects in this age of global capitalism will have to look at the experiences of the twenty-first-century Latin America radical left." He talks about global revolt taking place across the planet, but recognizes that "The global revolt has yet to address the matter of political power." This weakness is critical: "There can be no real emancipatory projects without addressing the matter of political power." The cases that are looked at in this volume—Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador primarily, but Nicaragua, El Salvador and Cuba as well—"while a heterodox group, are precisely those countries where the left exercises political power, or at least attempts to push forward a popular project from within the state." Robinson—a very experienced and long-term observer in Latin America himself—writes, "What becomes clear to me from the politics of the new radical left in Latin America is that *vanguardism* and *horizontalism* are twin pitfalls," but then clarifies so as to argue against the dichotomous thinking, the either/or approach being the problem, and that we should approach in an "and/but" manner. (Ellner, in a previous book, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, has discussed the interactions both vertically—between the state and society—and horizontally between movements, and their interactions.)

This volume is an excellent place to begin—and has the added advantage of authors knowing of these other cases taking place at the same, so there is a comparative consciousness that makes most of these contributions even more valuable than just the subject immediately at hand.

The book begins with Roger Burbach's "The Radical Left's Turbulent Transitions," Diana Raby's "Brief Hypotheses on the State, Democracy, and Revolution in Latin America Today," and Marcel Nelson's "Institutional Conflict and the Bolivarian Revolution: Venezuela's Negotiation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas," in efforts to give a "Theoretical, Historical, and International Background" to the entire volume.

Raby argues the importance of control of the state, specifically challenging autonomist theories currently in vogue: "the state—a revolutionized state ... is essential to any genuinely transformative (i.e., socialist) project. Only a revolutionary state, with the strength derived from mass popular support, control of key economic sectors, and revolutionary armed forces, can reclaim the public sphere and combat the global tyranny of unrestrained mercantilization and protecting sphere of social economy, social justice, and popular power."

Nelson makes a contribution that is very important, and for much more than Latin America. Building off of Nicos Polantz's theoretical work on the state, Nelson argues that the state is not a thing, such as something to be captured, but as a field of struggle, that includes many different relationships and forces. This means that just because one wins the position of head of state, this does not mean that every other part of the state will automatically line up and follow the leader. (This helps us understand differences between progressive mayors in the US with, for examples, the police.) What it means that every part of the state apparatus must be won to the progressive side, and it cannot be assumed that each will change automatically just because someone has won an election.

From there, the book shifts to discussing "The Twenty-First-Century Radical Left in Power in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador." This includes a chapter by Steve Ellner on "Social and Political Diversity and the Democratic Road to Change in

Venezuela,” Federico Fuentes’ “‘Bad Left Government’ versus ‘Good Left Social Movements’? Creative Tensions within Bolivia’s Process of Change,” and Marc Becker’s “Rafael Correa and Social Movements in Ecuador.” Besides being excellent discussions of each of these three countries and their current political struggles, one of the most important things presented in these sections is the necessity for elected progressive leaders to not forsake or turn on the left forces that got them into power—should the leaders be attacked by the right, without the left forces, who will defend them? In other words, while it is ridiculous to believe all will be sweetness and light between progressive elected officials and progressive social forces once “the left” gets into power, this is an important warning to progressive officials of the need to always remember who are their strategic allies.

The following section is “Influences of the Twenty-First-Century Radical Left in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Cuba.” This includes an article by Héctor Perla, Jr., and Héctor M. Cruz-Feliciano titled “The Twenty-First-Century Road to Socialism in El Salvador and Nicaragua: Making Sense of Apparent Paradoxes.” This is followed by a very interesting chapter on “Cuba’s New Socialism: Different Visions Shaping Current Changes” by Camila Piñeiro Harnecker.” The latter is particularly interesting in light of changes currently taking place in Cuba, and Piñeiro Harnecker knowledgeably discusses different aspects of the range of thinking going on among the Cuban people.

The final section is on “Economy, Society and Media.” Thomas Purcell writes on “The Political Economy of Social Production Companies in Venezuela,” which discusses efforts to make the Venezuelan economy less dependent on oil. George Ciccariello-Maher writes on “Constituent Moments, Constitutional Processes: Social Movements and the New Latin American Left,” and seeks “to avoid fetishizing either constituent power from below or the constituted power of the state, focusing instead

on the dynamic interplay between the two.” And this is followed by Kevin Young’s article “The Good, the Bad, and the Benevolent Interventionist: US Press and Intellectual Distortions of the Latin American Left.”

This is followed by editor Steve Ellner’s “Concluding Observations: The Twenty-First-Century Radical Left and the Latin American Road to Change.” In this, Ellner summarizes the changes going on—particularly in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela—noting they are influenced by “identification with Latin American tradition and nationalism, even while the thinking of its leaders is also rooted in Marxism.”

Having this broader context provided by the *Latin America’s Radical Left* collection allows us to delve into one case in detail, that of Venezuela. In *We Created Chávez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, George Ciccariello-Maher gets behind the rhetoric—of both the left and the right—to try to understand the developments in Venezuela.

So much of recent Venezuelan history has been viewed through the lens of the late president, Hugo Chávez. Chávez, a progressive, former military leader was democratically elected into the presidency in 1998, taking office the next year. But the coup attempt in April 2002—where Chávez was removed from office and detained by right wing putschists until he was freed through a revolt of the people of Caracas and military forces that remained loyal—and an amazing film by an Irish film company of the coup, “The Revolution Will Not be Televised,” brought Chávez to world attention.

The film company was in Venezuela to try to understand Chávez and what was happening in the country, and found itself inside the National Palace “Miraflores” during the coup and, despite not knowing whether they would even survive, kept the cameras rolling. Showing Chavez as a very charismatic and popular president, strongly supported by the poor and traditionally disenfranchised of the country before the coup, and then

showing the coup from the inside Miraflores—as well as presenting the arrogance of the coup leaders during their brief “moment in the sun”—and then Chávez’ return to Miraflores, the film introduced this revolutionary to the world.

And Chávez kept progressing, moving from a limited to more a radical vision of what could be done in Venezuela—based on radical ideas of popular, grassroots democracy—eventually putting forth the concept of “socialism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century” in the mid-2000s. And his willingness to challenge the US Empire brought him many followers from outside and well as inside the country.

Ciccariello-Maher seeks to understand what is behind Chávez: as he explained to one interlocutor, who asked why he was there, “We had come to understand the revolutionary collectives that constitute Venezuelan Hugo Chávez’s most radical support base, to grasp their political vision and their often tense relationship with the processes of political transformation known as the Bolivarian Revolution.”

To understand this book, then, we have to recognize it is *not* about Chávez.

Then who is the book about? The book is about “the people,” but that is not just anyone. Building off of the writings of Argentine-Mexican philosopher of liberation, Enrique Dussel, “the Latin American *pueblo* is instead a *category of both rupture and struggle*, a moment of combat in which those oppressed *within* the prevailing social order and those excluded *from* it intervene to transform the system, in which a victimized *part* of the community speaks for and attempts to radically change the *whole*” (emphasis in original). In other words, whether included within the system or excluded from it, the author focuses on those who have been oppressed *and* who have stood up to transform the system: it honors not those oppressed, but the oppressed who have chosen to fight.

To understand this, however, Ciccariello-Maher presents a very sophisticated understanding of the Venezuelan "process": "the goal here is to avoid the twin dangers that plague contemporary discussions of revolutionary change in Latin America in particular: the tendency to fetishize the state, official power, and its institutions, and the opposing tendency to fetishize antipower."

Ciccariello-Maher tells the story—actually, it's many stories—of people's struggles against oppression, going back to 1958 and the end of the last dictatorship in Venezuela. He talks about the guerrilla struggle, when people took to the hills and alleys of the cities to fight. While that failed, people learned from those experiences, and then went back into the barrios and reconnected with the people therein, although some continued military operations. They survived tremendous police repression over the years—repression is just limited to dictatorships. He talks of a barrio, 23 de Enero (January 23), on the west side of Caracas, and a center of organizing.

The author talks about the economic devaluation of the bolivar in 1983. The government turned to the International Monetary Fund for relief: "As the macroeconomic crisis deepened, the Venezuelan government would respond in the increasingly strict neoliberal terms of the International Monetary Fund, and with both its capacity and willingness to provide for the population in free fall, the country became a veritable tinderbox of resistance." And the government responded to this resistance by widespread repression as compared to the targeted repression it had used against the guerrillas. Ultimately, however, "this broad offensive against the masses pushed barrio residents toward the new organizational forms oriented around self-government, the elimination of the drug trade, and armed self-defense ... which remains central to the Bolivarian Revolution."

This gets one to the heart of the Venezuelan revolutionary process as it has developed, the "proceso." The fact is that



the revolutionaries, and probably most activists, do not trust the state, yet they support Chávez. How can that be explained? There is a difference, too, between the present and the future: the distinction between Chávez, as head of state, and the *proceso*. In the first case, Chávez has won their personal support, although that's not necessarily true for those around him. However, that trust is not a blank check: the *proceso* is more important than the individual. So, in other words, when Chávez acts progressively, they support him; when he acts in reactionary manner, they challenge him and the state apparatus in general: the second position "maintains the possibility of moving decisively beyond the president if conditions warrant it."

Yet in trying to understand the development of the *proceso*, Ciccariello-Maher disorients the "traditional" story of Chávez and his rise to power: instead of focusing on Chávez' attempted coup attempt in 1992 and then jumping forward to his election to the presidency in 1998, this account focuses first on the "Caracazo," an urban uprising centered in Caracas that exploded in February 1989. This was the time, "one of the rare and explosive instance in which the force of the people appears as the decisive actor," and he argues that 1992 and 1998 grew out of events in 1989. Further, he sees the next crucial moment when the masses of people of Caracas streamed out of their shacks to converge on Miraflores to demand Chávez' return, overturning the coup attempt, on April 13, 2002.

And because of the support of the people—as I quickly came to understand during a short trip to Venezuela in 2006 that Chávez didn't have the organization to get these people out to support the president—Chávez not only became more radical himself personally and escalated the *proceso*, but the *proceso* was able to withstand the economic sabotage by the elite in late 2002-early 2003 that threatened to undermine all that had been done. And that the *proceso* has continued to advance to

this date.

It is this recognition—that it is *el pueblo* that is the heart of the revolutionary process, not an elected leader, not even as one as charismatic as Hugo Chavez—that makes Ciccariello-Maher's account so important. And this is a tremendously inspiring account, which became even more important upon the death of Chávez in March 2013: by understanding the role of the mobilized people in the proceso, one would know that the proceso was not dependent on Chávez and would continue, although obviously whoever succeed Chávez would propel or hinder the process.

There is a limitation that must be commented upon: despite the excellent account developed by the author, and it seems to be fairly applicable throughout many of the barrios surrounding Caracas, there is simply no way to tell how widespread this phenomena is across the country. That might be considered “small potatoes” by some, but Venezuela is more than just Caracas, the capital, although it is the largest urban concentration. Are these projects, so well explicated by Ciccariello-Maher, common throughout the rest of the country, and especially in other major cities?

It is important to raise this issue, as the opposition in Venezuela has opposed and challenged “Chavismo,” the ideology officially established by Hugo Chávez, sometimes more effectively and sometimes less, but still fairly consistently. This opposition is led by members of the elites, but it extends at least somewhat into the higher echelons of the military, and it certainly includes students who have stayed within the traditional, private higher educational system—and as the government has not been able to overcome crime, or the subversion of commercial interests who often limited goods on shelves in the stores, it has won some support among working people and the poor. Additionally, we know the US Government has long acted to support the opposition, giving them much more power and potential than

could be won on their own.

One of the things learned by Chávez and his allies is the need to use the state apparatus to *devolve* power downward into the masses. The project of communal councils and support for radical trade unionism—training “ordinary” people to make decisions and take power over their collective lives—is an extension of the proceso. Based on what’s been done previously, it is what gives me hope that the opposition can be kept to the margins, and the Eagle from landing in Venezuela.

In short, two excellent volumes to help us understand what is going on in Latin America, with most attention being paid to South America. I think they are essential resources, and I think they provide much food for thought for those of us who are politically active—not only about developments “there,” but also “here.”

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