

Review - Democracy, Revolution and Geopolitics in Latin America

Written by Thomas Muhr

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THOMAS MUHR, MAR 18 2015

Democracy, Revolution, and Geopolitics in Latin America

Edited By: Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández

New York: Routledge, 2014.

On 5 December 2014 the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde, declared in her opening address to the 'Challenges for Securing Growth and Shared Prosperity in Latin America' conference, held in Santiago de Chile, that the 'proliferation' of regional integration projects, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), 'has created a "spaghetti bowl" of regimes' whose 'aggregate benefits are unclear', while calling for 'new ways to integrate the region into global value chains' (Lagarde, 2014). This was perceived in Caracas as imperialist interference, and an immediate response came the following day: by pointing to the history of neoliberal devastation in the global peripheries, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro proclaimed that 'Latin America has now overcome the phase of prescriptions that today are destroying Europe', accusing Lagarde of having a 'spaghetti brain' (Maduro, 2014).

Methodology matters

What Maduro, and other observers, may perhaps be less conscious of is that the elusive 'spaghetti bowl' reference puts Lagarde in good company with (neo)realist international relations scholars, who have elevated the metaphor to prominence in the field of Latin America-Caribbean politics. Within the (neo)realist script, resorting to simplistic metaphors lacking rational analysis and explanatory power is common practice to address social phenomena whose geographies are too complex to be grasped by the discipline's methodological nationalist approach. This is precisely why this outstanding volume edited by Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández is a crucial contribution to the latent, though ongoing paradigmatic struggle over how to make sense of the revolutionary transformations of Latin America-Caribbean – a struggle between the dominant (neo)realist and comparative politics interpretations and alternative approaches grounded in what may be characterised as reflexive critical globalisation theory. This seeks to explain the complexities of the *why* and *how* of social transformation by analysing processes and social relations among state and non-state actors across scales beyond the international (including the local, national, regional, global), that is, transnational, subnational and supranational processes and relations, in an inter- or transdisciplinary fashion without which the construction of this new, emerging socialism as a global counter-hegemonic project cannot be understood (Muhr, 2008; 2011; 2013). Thus the case studies presented in this book, in the words of Angosto-Ferrández, 'analyse and explain the relation between the Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela's foreign policy, and current geopolitics' (p. 3), revealing 'the particular transnational quality that Venezuelan politics has acquired' (p. 177).

The book, which is accessible for both academic and politically interested or educated general audiences, addresses this methodological challenge through a post-structuralist approach that emphasizes the role of intersubjectivity in the construction of social reality. This framework is developed in Angosto-Ferrández's thoughtful introductory and concluding chapters, which complement each other and may best be read together and prior to the rest of the book.

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With emphasis on the cultural dimension of (counter-)hegemony, and drawing from Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's work as well as offering a critique of realist and neoliberal institutionalist approaches to geopolitical analysis (their limitations to 'power and interest analyses') and idealist approaches (that place 'values and identity formation' at the centre), Angosto-Ferrández proposes approaching the study of geopolitics through 'reflexivism and discourse analysis', that 'acknowledge the existence of international system structures, but contend that these are constituted by identities and interests and, very importantly, that they are dependent on process – structures do not preexist processes' (p. 181). Equally important: the editor recognises that 'discourse cannot be separated from material reality' (p. 182). The book thus transcends the bulk of studies that, first, reduce Venezuela's role in the regional and global transformations to one that is simply 'neorealist economy-based' (p. 183) and, second, the common voodoo-like attributions of Venezuelan (and other nations') resource dependency to a 'disease' ('Dutch disease') or a 'curse' ('resource curse') (p. 184), rather than the product of historical processes. While it may be argued that a framework of this kind could be arrived at through alternative theories and conceptions, such as David Harvey's (1996) and Robert Cox's (1996) (see my own body of work), this book presents a conclusive and very innovative approach within the field.

Contribution to inter-disciplinary knowledge

The remaining six chapters 2-7 then 'give life' to this approach by analysing the Bolivarian project from different disciplinary angles, including anthropology, cultural studies, international studies, political economy, political science and sociology. Chapter 2, by Tim Anderson, draws on the important distinction between USA-led 'Pan-Americanism' and anti-imperialist 'Latin Americanism' (*latinoamericanismo*) in a historical account of the emergence of ALBA, UNASUR and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), to argue that the political genealogy of these initiatives is rooted in 19th century Latin American-Caribbean independence and integration ideals. By extension, Chapter 3, by Anthea McCarthy-Jones, links Venezuelan domestic politics to foreign policy and the solidarity- and cooperation-driven regional integration through ALBA, UNASUR, CELAC, Petrocaribe and the Bank of the South. Rodrigo Acuña's Chapter 4 presents the emergence and functioning of Petrocaribe and some of its achievements with respect to energy and social security as well as challenges with regard to 'accountability', 'transparency' and 'corruption'. By reference to Nancy Fraser's global justice framework and the distinction between individual 'freedom of expression' and the communal (i.e. collective) 'right to information', Kathryn Lehman's Chapter 5 analyses the democratisation of media production in Venezuela with respect to indigenous groups and how the challenge posed by transcontinental movements to the power of transnational capitalist media enterprises contributes to an alternative form of governance. Chapter 6, again by Angosto-Ferrández, explains the central role of indigeneity in Venezuelan elections, showing how the reactionary ('opposition') bloc has managed to appropriate some of the central political signifiers of *chavismo* through a populist politics. Finally, Michael Humphrey and Estela Valverde counter-pose in their Chapter 7 the neoliberal urban security model based on 'urban renewal', 'securitization' and 'citizen security' with the Bolivarian urban security model that views the reduction of structural inequality and poverty alongside 'state recentralization' as key to crime reduction.

Limitations: The general versus the specific

As it is with edited volumes, depending on one's background and interests, readers may find some chapters of greater interest and originality than others. As Angosto-Ferrández suggests (p. 180), Chapters 2-4 do not present new insights, but provide comprehensive introductions to the ideological origins, contemporary discursive articulations and institutionalised expressions of the Bolivarian project in and beyond Venezuela. These are informative key readings for novices to the field. However, as most of the issues and historical details in these chapters have been exhaustively discussed – see, for instance, Gott (2005), Lambie & Alzugaray Treto (2011), Lievesley & Ludlam (2009), Raby (2006) – after 15 years of the Bolivarian revolution and 10 years of ALBA, I would have expected more specific empirically, analytically and theoretically grounded in-depth discussions (with regard to the themes embraced by the book: geopolitics, democracy, revolution, regionalism). Thus, by and large, Chapters 2-4 present themselves as at times over-detailed narratives overwhelmingly drawn from secondary sources, raising the question of what larger argument much of this information from often 10-15 years ago exactly serves. At its worst, this leads to a pseudo-critical reproduction of dubious journalistic claims, such as from Rory Carroll's writings, regarding the imperialist global governance repertoire of alleged 'broad corruption', non-transparency and non-

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accountability in Petrocaribe (pp. 77-78). With respect to these chapters, then, some further observations may be noted: first, as important as the distinction of Pan-Americanism from Latin Americanism in Chapter 2 is, the analysis could have given greater recognition of the historical centrality of *latinoamericanismo* (unity, integration, cooperation to confront USA imperialism) within the Cuban Revolution (Suárez Salazar, 1991) and, therefore, Cuba's role in the transformations under discussion. A Venezuela-centric approach and methodological unilinearity in explaining the formation of regionalisms such as ALBA may have been useful in the early years of the Bolivarian Revolution, while a more dialectical analysis is more appropriate today. After all, overlooked by many commentators, from around 2008/2009 on, with increasing institutionalisation, the former presidential protagonism or presidential diplomacy (especially by Chávez) has been superseded by policy-making through councils, commissions and working groups that meet on a regular basis outside the political limelight. Second, Chapter 2 reproduces the common misrepresentation of the Bank of the South as an independent institution, overlooking that the bank actually became defined as an UNASUR institution already in 2007. Third, Table 1 in Chapter 4 shows the Petrocaribe financing scheme as first conceived in 2005, leaving out the 2008 adjustments. I should equally emphasize, however, that in comparison to other publications on the topic(s), I detect relatively few such imprecisions.

Strengths: Entering new terrain

The remaining Chapters 5-7 are outstanding and enter hitherto under-researched terrain. Here I find the great detail dedicated to the discussions as very appropriate and necessary to capture and explain the complexities of social transformation. To me, most noteworthy in the profoundly well-researched and theoretically grounded Chapter 5 on the Bolivarian Revolution's counter-hegemonic promotion of the collective right to information 'to decolonize knowledge hierarchies' (p. 87) are the different case studies that link claims-making to such issues as health, land, film and justice. The chapter's emphasis on the effort of breaking with the global capitalist media dictatorship disguised as 'freedom of expression' reminded me of T.H. Marshall noting that the right to freedom of speech or expression 'has little real substance if, from lack of education, you have nothing to say that is worth saying, and no means of making yourself heard to say it' (1950: 21). Here the book implicitly complements and links up with the important research done on education in the Bolivarian Revolution and the ALBA-TCP (see, e.g., Griffiths & Millei, 2013a, b; Motta & Cole, 2013). The equally well-researched and convincingly argued Chapter 6 highlights, inter alia, the shortcomings of the use of 'indigenous movement' in mainstream literature as 'any politically oriented activity in which indigenous actors participate' (p. 124). By counter-posing 'indigenous movement' with 'indigenous organizations' in the context of claims-making (p. 123), the chapter is excellent in arguing that 'indigenous organizations and their allies did never constitute in Venezuela a social movement' (p. 123) and that the 'institutional empowerment of the indigenous population after 1999' (p. 123) has been 'state-sponsored' instead. This analysis underscores the relevance of such theorisations as that of a dialectics between the 'state-in-revolution' and 'organised society' (Muhr, 2008: 266; 2011; 2013) and Jennifer Martinez's notion of a 'double-turn in counter-hegemony' (Martinez, 2013). Thus, by placing the state-society relations at the centre of analysis, the idealisation of civil society and movements in the mainstream post-development literature, and the assumed state-society antagonism (and simplistic anti-statism), is rightfully contested.

Chapter 7, however, appears to contradict this important ontological and methodological insight as 'participation and social mobilisation' (i.e. 'society') is dichotomised with 'state control and recentralization' (i.e. 'the state') (p. 165). Here, this antagonism is derived from a flawed understanding of state transformation in Venezuela: the authors misunderstand the unsuccessful constitutional reform proposed in 2007 by associating it with 'a blueprint of a reconstituted central state to make redundant the existing elected governors and mayors and their administrations and police forces created in the 1990s' (p. 160). While it is true that a national police force is being created while attempting to transform the colonial bourgeois state structure, to speak of a general 'state recentralization' is inappropriate as the 2007 constitutional reform would have established the Communal State which, as communal self-government, is the ultimate form of democratic decentralisation (to which, paradoxically, or contradictorily, the authors themselves point on p. 165). Here, as in Chapters 2-4, the exclusive reliance on secondary sources may be responsible for such inconsistencies. Nonetheless, the authors' analysis of processes of urban de-gentrification and the socio-spatial restructuring of Caracas discussed in relation to the Bolivarian counter-hegemonic security model are pioneering and indispensable contributions to the conceptual and theoretical discussions of the Bolivarian project.

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Conclusions: Beyond disciplinary reductionism

This multidisciplinary volume, in its entirety, transcends the sum of its individual chapters and stands out among the mass of un-methodological and under-theorised publications in the field. While each chapter can be read as a stand-alone analysis, the value of the book consists in its methodological innovativeness, the diversity of themes discussed, nonetheless complementing each other and thus approaching a more holistic picture of this socialist transformation. This has larger implications in the context of the crisis of global capitalism: only a multi- and inter-disciplinary analysis, which perhaps can only be achieved through edited volumes, can contribute to a political strategy for socialist transformation. This is of particular relevance considering the re-strengthening of the left in the European peripheries at this moment, and strategies that will be needed to transform the European Union into a socially just and more democratic project once these forces enter into government (as has happened in Greece in 2015). In this regard, I would have liked to see a stronger conceptual consistency, especially with respect to the use of 'hegemony'. While throughout the book 'hegemony' appears to be used in the (neo-)Gramscian sense as consensual domination (which is consistent with the post-structuralist approach), on some occasions (e.g., pp. 69, 178) the mainstream political science and international relations use of simply the dominance of a particular government or state in the international system seems to be adopted (for discussions of the different uses of 'hegemony' in international relations and post-structuralism, see, for example, Robinson (2005) and Laclau & Mouffe (2001), respectively).

While combining introductory readings with deeper specialist elaborations may be viewed as a strength or a weakness, overall the following – highly appropriate – key arguments are developed in this book: that the Bolivarian Revolution is an inter- and transnational project of global scope and relevance; that ALBA, UNASUR and CELAC evolved through interrelated processes; that none of these regionalisms would have come into being without Chávez's leadership; and that there is a profound democratisation – social, political, economic, cultural – of Venezuelan state and society occurring at this historical conjuncture. Thus providing ample evidence of the 'aggregate benefits' of the Bolivarian projects, the book is of particular interest to the open-minded reader truly interested in understanding the revolutionary transformations of Latin America-Caribbean and their relevance to counter-hegemonic globalization: to go beyond, as Angosto-Ferrández and Lehman emphasize, respectively, the frequently patronizing misrepresentations and outright dismissal and ignorance of the processes in question (p. 179) while also transcending the pejorative 'Pink Tide' label (p. 106).

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