

Review - The Right in Latin America

Written by John Polga-Hecimovich

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JOHN POLGA-HECIMOVICH, OCT 16 2016

The Right in Latin America: Elite Power, Hegemony and the Struggle for the State

By Barry Cannon

Abingdon: Routledge

Barry Cannon's *The Right in Latin America* is a timely publication for a public interested in Latin American politics: after a decade and a half in power, the so-called 'Pink Tide' of Leftist governments in the region is finally receding, and conservative presidents have returned in places like Argentina and Brazil in a new cycle of anti-incumbency. It is also a book that may raise the ire of some political scientists, with its criticism of pure political scientific approaches to the study of the Right, its reluctance to follow social science methodological orthodoxy, and its willingness to cast away academic impartiality. Although written by a noted political sociologist and published by an academic press, the book will probably appeal more to a non-academic audience than a mainstream academic one.

The volume is heavily anchored in the field of political sociology, with its questions of class, power relations, and forms of socio-political and economic dominance. Not only does it borrow its central theoretical contribution—the study of the Latin American right through the concept of social power—from Michael Mann (1986), but Cannon does not miss an opportunity to criticize mainstream political science for the inadequacy of their academic toolkits in explaining how the Right exercises political power. He maintains that these studies tend to focus on electoral politics, and that a more comprehensive analytic framework must understand the ideological group in terms of elite social power and control. Indeed, his re-conceptualization of the Right is a valuable contribution to the study of power relations and political hegemony, while the theoretical framework might be similarly useful for political scientists in their study of the Right.

Unfortunately, however, the execution and analysis are not always disciplined, and they are further clouded by a lack of theoretical and methodological rigor. Cannon's research question is never made entirely clear, he fails to provide plausible alternative hypotheses to his theory, and the research design is almost nonexistent—empirical analyses largely restricted to conclusions drawn from personal interviews and country studies whose case selection is never explained. What is more, rather than strive for impartiality, the wording and descriptions appear to pass value judgments on competing ideological currents, criticizing the Right and neoliberalism in some places, while appearing to laud authoritarian alternatives to liberal democracy from the populist Left, particularly Venezuela. In short, this is social science with plenty of grist for debate, but without much science.

The first major problem is theoretical. Despite its title and purported *raison d'être*, it is not clear that this book is about the Right; instead, it appears to be a story about elites and elite power. The author frames the book's motivation as a puzzle of how the Right has dominated Latin American society without necessarily enjoying strong political parties and sustained electoral success (17-19). Following Bobbio (1996), the author understands the left-right ideological dimension to reflect different conceptions of the value of equality. As a result, not only are elites the core constituency of the Right—Cannon affirms that, "A central assumption of this study is that elites in general hold neoliberal worldviews and policy preferences" (29)—but they are functionally equivalent. The puzzle of Rightist hegemony can therefore be explained by the fact that elite power articulates itself over a number of dimensions and not merely the political.

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If the Right and the elite are congruent, as Cannon maintains, then this analytic framework is entirely appropriate. However, the equivalence merits far greater justification—especially in a region where political leaders self-identifying with the ideological Left have dominated state and society, from Castrista rule in Cuba to the cronyism of the most recent Sandinista government in Nicaragua to the privileged role of the ostensibly Leftist *boliburgués* in Venezuela. Further, if elites' position in society is *prima facie* evidence that they make up the ideological Right, as Cannon seems to suggest, then the argument becomes a tautology and is not falsifiable: the Right is the same as the elite, and since groups in power are the elite, they must also be the Right. Ergo, the Left cannot dominate society, because it would become the Right.

The analytical framework would also have benefited from greater attention to plausible alternative explanations. Cannon summarizes Gibson (2001) and edited volumes by Middlebrook (2000) and Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) on the Latin American Right, and dismisses their *approaches* as narrow; however, he is less systematic about breaking down their theoretical proposals. In fact, it is difficult to detect plausible alternative hypotheses to Cannon's contention that the power of the Right can be explained through the concept of social power. By extension, none of the empirical analyses seriously entertain and/or dismiss viable alternative explanations. The implication is that the empirical evidence speaks exclusively to Cannon's theory, without allowing him to accept or reject alternatives.

There are other, smaller, analytical weaknesses that could be improved. Notably, it would have been nice to read about the ideological and strategic heterogeneity within the Right, and how different groups of the Right (or different groups of elites) may ultimately seek different goals for themselves and society. The literature on the Latin American Left (e.g. Levitsky and Roberts 2013; Weyland 2013), distinguishes social democratic parties in Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, from populist left parties and leaders in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, acknowledging that these movements generally possess different objectives and modes of achieving those objectives. Sadly, the book fails to acknowledge the presence of "many Rights" in Latin America until Chapter 5, and never incorporates this heterogeneity into the theory building or empirical analysis.

Similarly, there are moments in the book where the analysis seems to attribute certain characteristics to the Right that are equally applicable to the Left (or ideological center). For instance, chapter 6 examines strategies the Right can use to counter Leftist post-neoliberalism, framing them as 1) institutional power strategies (e.g. the election of consolidated Right-wing parties, populist, personalist electoral vehicles, or Rightist colonization of historically Leftist parties), 2) mobilizational strategies (e.g. media campaigns to mobilize protestors against the Left), and 3) semi- or extra-constitutional strategies (e.g. removal of a Leftist president in office). Ultimately, though, these are merely constitutional and extra-constitutional strategies of contestation available to *any* group, regardless of ideology, and are not the exclusive domain of the Right. What is more, both Rightists and Leftists in the region have employed and continue to employ these tools.

The book's methodological deficits are larger than the theoretical ones, with troubling implications. This is not confined to a single part of the book; in fact there is a notable lack of methodological rigor throughout, from a lack of attention paid to the selection of the case studies in chapters 3 and 4 to a problematic—and worrying—operationalization of key concepts in the data driven analysis. It's not that Cannon's conclusions are erroneous, but that he fails to arrive at them honestly.

To begin, the case studies and interviews appear to be either *ad hoc* selections, or worse, selected on the dependent variable with no deviant cases. To wit, chapter 3 aims to show that elites hold neoliberal worldviews. To support this, Cannon turns to interviews with people he deems 'elite' from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Venezuela. There is no justification for his choice of the four countries, or for the choice of the individuals within each country (let alone ideological measurement of the dominant individuals who match Cannon's definition of elites, or justification of their inclusion). He does not interview the senior government or military officials in Venezuela who make up at least part of the contemporary governing elite, nor does he interview other figures from the Left who might share similar worldviews. It may be true that neoliberalism remains the guiding assumptions of the Right, but by failing to conduct similar interviews with the Left—Social Democrats in Chile, Radicals in Argentina, Liberals in Colombia—it is impossible to determine if the neoliberalism corresponds to *only* the Right, or to both the Right and the institutionalized Left. If this latter point is true, of course, then it undermines a large part of Cannon's argument.

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Along the same lines, chapter 4's explanation of how the Right has entrenched its power uses short case studies of Mexico, Chile, Colombia, and Peru, but never examines any divergent case where the Right has been unable to do so. Including, Cuba, for example, might change the explanation quite a bit. Once again, the explanation may be entirely correct, but by choosing cases where the independent and dependent variables are the same is not an effective selection method for eliminating causal explanations.

Alas, Cannon's foray into data-driven analysis is equally unconvincing. In chapter 5, he attempts to measure the retrenchment of the Right by Left-wing governments across the region by operationalizing each of the four dimensions of Mann's (1986) social power concept (economic, political, ideological, military) as well as a transnational dimension derived from Silva (2009). This one-shot, cross-sectional approach is worrisome enough, since it is not able to measure trajectories or map change, but the operationalizations themselves are of such weak construct validity that it is impossible to draw inferences from the exercise.

Deviations from neoliberal political power and neoliberal ideology are particularly egregious. In the former, the author uses the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2014 Democracy Index to assign scores for liberal democracy; he considers places scoring high as perpetuations of the status quo and those scoring low on the polyarchy scale as threats to neoliberalism. In other words, his measure unbelievably equates liberal democracy with Rightism and authoritarianism with Leftism! In the latter case, deviations from neoliberal ideology is measured as reversals of freedom of the press and liberal freedoms. Besides the multicollinearity between these indicators, they assume that challenges to neoliberalism and the Right are most salient when they are non-democratic—which is quite the indictment of the Left. The deeper problem with these measurements, however, is that the empirical indicator appears to be orthogonal to the concept it is operationalizing. In the end, Cannon concludes chapter 5 by saying that, "Overall in the Latin American region, the Left has presented a considerable challenge to the Right-wing, neoliberal hegemony (109)". This may be true, but there is no way to conclude this given the research design.

Last, and the way in which the book most clearly deviates from contemporary social science work, is that it appears to sympathize with an ideological current—in this case, the Left. This partiality makes the analysis seem more like punditry than science. Examples abound. Cannon refers to the non-partisan think tank that evaluates the state of civil liberties worldwide, as the "Right-wing U.S. think tank Freedom House" (105). To support a contention that the U.S. was "deeply" involved in the 2002 coup against Hugo Chávez, Cannon cites Chavista mouthpiece Eva Golinger, who the *New York Times* called "one of the most prominent fixtures of Venezuela's expanding state propaganda complex", and who referred to herself as "a soldier for this [Bolivarian] revolution" (Romero 2011). He then claims the police revolt against Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa on September 30, 2010, was a coup d'état (134-136), a charge made by Correa and his government but discredited by virtually every impartial observer (neither Archigos nor any other prominent academic database codes this episode as a coup—something Cannon himself recognizes). It is fine for Cannon's ideological convictions to guide his research questions, but it casts doubt on the objectivity of his analysis and conclusions, and ultimately, the book's contribution to academic discourse.

Despite these myriad shortcomings, the book is still ultimately a novel and readable account of elite power in Latin America—and, at least in most of the region, the power of the Right. Cannon is clearly familiar with Latin America, the historical processes that shaped it, and its major actors, and he appears to care about its people. The book's analytical and methodological shortcomings should not trouble non-academics, and may be more appealing to Leftist academics in and around the region, as well as those unconvinced by the orthodox political science approaches and methods. For others, such as myself, those issues may be harder to overlook.

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About the author:

John Polga-Hecimovich is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the U.S. Naval Academy. His research is broadly focused on the effects of political institutions on democratic stability, policymaking, and governance, especially in Latin America. He has published widely in academic journals in both English and Spanish, and is currently at work turning his doctoral dissertation on the use of executive power in Latin America into a book. Dr. Polga-Hecimovich holds a B.A. in Government and Spanish from Dartmouth College, a Master's Degree in Latin American Studies from the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar (Ecuador), and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Pittsburgh. He has also taught at Wake Forest University, the College of William and Mary, and FLACSO-Ecuador, and he has conducted academic fieldwork in Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia.