



Jeffery R. Webber

THE
LAST DAY
OF OPPRESSION,
AND THE
FIRST DAY
OF THE SAME

**The Politics and Economics of
the New Latin American Left**

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Pluto Press
www.plutobooks.com

First published 2016 by Haymarket

This edition published 2017 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 9953 9 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0044 2 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0046 6 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0045 9 EPUB eBook

Printed in Canada by union labor.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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ONE

Latin America's Second Independence

Ecuador's independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century did not bring with it a social revolution. The racist and unequal pyramidal hierarchy of colonial society was not turned on its head. Instead, the elite descendants of Spanish *conquistadores* now ruled on their own behalf, rather than in the service of the Spanish crown. For those beneath them, much remained as it had been. Thus a popular slogan of the postindependence period emerged: the last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.¹

The expression, if in a novel form, captures something essential of the first decade and a half of twenty-first-century Latin American politics. The early 2000s saw a remarkable political and economic crisis of neoliberalism facilitate an explosive reawakening of extraparliamentary social movements throughout Latin America, but particularly in South America—strikes, land occupations, unemployed workers' roadblocks and factory takeovers, and indigenous uprisings. By the mid-2000s, this effervescence translated in a muted style into the parliamentary halls and presidential palaces of many South American countries as center-left and left parties were elected to office.

Parallel to these political dynamics, the economic crisis of neoliberalism

1 "Oppression" in this phrase is translated as "despotism" in Agustín Cueva's famous text *El proceso de dominación política del Ecuador* (Quito: Ediciones Crítica, 1972). I prefer "oppression" in this book, following common use of the slogan today, as described to me in a 2010 interview by indigenous activist Luis Macas in Quito, Ecuador.

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in the region was eclipsed by the rising tide of a China-driven boom in international commodity prices. With minimal changes to the tax regimes and royalty rates on resource commodities—mining minerals, natural gas and oil, and agro-industrial products—left governments witnessed massive revenue increases in the state treasuries, even as multinational and domestic capitalists enjoyed soaring net profits. Targeted distribution through cash-transfer programs and other social welfare initiatives, along with higher employment rates, led to falling poverty rates, and even some falls in income inequality in parts of Latin America ruled by the various shades of the left.

Still, even taking into account variability across cases, the new Latin American left did not challenge the underlying class structures of its societies or the systems of capitalist accumulation that fundamentally reproduce the basic patterns of simultaneous wealth and poverty, of luxury alongside misery. The facility with which center-left and left governments were able to skim a portion of the rent generated by the commodities boom and redirect it to the popular classes helped for a time to conceal underlying structures of continuity. Politically, social movements were channeled into the labyrinth of state apparatuses and significantly disarmed in the process.

Then global capitalism entered its latest severe crisis in 2007–2008. The impact on Latin America was not immediate. Indeed, after a dip in growth in 2009, the next two years seemed to suggest the region had somehow escaped world dynamics. By 2012, however, China had dramatically slowed down, the Eurozone and the United States were sputtering, and the commodity prices that had done much to hold South America aloft started their swift descent. The politics of austerity already introduced with such rabidity in North America and Europe (especially southern Europe and particularly Greece) were now dictating the winds of Latin American political economies once again.

This time, however, it was center-left and left governments that began to make the class decisions of austerity politics. With declining state revenues, they began—again with variation across cases—to socialize the costs of declines in state treasuries onto the vast majority, rather than turning on the rich. They sided with the surplus appropriators rather than the direct producers of Latin American wealth. These class decisions often took the form of cuts to social programs that had been primed during the era of commodity booms. As opposed to radicalizing the left turn in the context of the emerging crisis, center-left and left governments increasingly adapted to the imperatives of capital. But while capital had flourished under many of these governments, the new left had never been the first choice of private investors. They have sensed

blood, and are now going for the kill—new right politics are on the ascent in extraparliamentary and parliamentary forms throughout the region.

Thus, while left governments bend over backward to capitulate to capital and ensure market confidence, capital has left them to flounder in the political darkness, preferring a return to traditional and new rights, or sometimes a novel symbiosis of the two. Meanwhile, the austerity drives of left governments have alienated much of their popular bases, who show up in meager numbers when they are finally called upon to defend left administrations against right-wing belligerence in the streets, as in Congress.

The last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.

But this phrase should not be understood in fatalistic terms of predestined outcomes. The end of the cycle of progressive governments should not be equated straightforwardly with the end of the Latin American left. The latter's social movement and trade union modalities are unlikely to suffer quietly the counteroffensive of the right. The future is still in play. The outcome is undecided. And we will need to turn our eyes below and to the left to register the pulse of political developments in the years ahead—to the evolving ideological, organizational, and political balance of forces outside the institutional halls of formal professional politics and leaderships, as much as to what is happening inside those visible corridors of power. This book raises some of the questions that are important to keep in mind and provides some preliminary outlines of responses to these questions.

The Architecture of the Book

Chapter 2 examines the political and economic dynamics of the Latin American left from the early 1990s to the present. It measures the shifting balance of forces—ideological, social, economic, and military—between the rural and urban popular classes and oppressed groups, the domestic ruling classes, and imperialism across the different phases of the period in question. It maps the 1990s as a period of neoliberal hegemony and left-wing disarticulation before shifting to the economic crisis of neoliberalism between 1998 and 2002. It shows how this economic crisis transformed into a political crisis through the rise of extraparliamentary social movements and left-wing rearticulation in the early 2000s. From here it charts the movement of the left from the extraparliamentary terrain to the corridors of state power through the election of center-left and left governments in the mid-2000s in the context of a

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commodities boom. In this context, it explores the rise of compensatory states as the dominant left form of rule during the boom period. Next, the chapter maps the delayed reverberation of the global economic crisis of 2007–2008 into the region and its political consequences. It provides in-depth case studies of the present conjuncture in Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador. The predominant themes in the case studies are declining forms of left hegemony and the various modalities of right-wing rearticulation.

Chapter 3 interrogates contemporary theoretical debates around enduring patterns of inequality in contemporary Latin America. It argues that the dominant streams of academic and policy writing on the topic are limited by their acknowledged or unacknowledged adherence to Weberian historical sociology and/or neostructuralist economics. These theoretical limitations mean that most writing on inequality in contemporary Latin America is flawed by a thin conception of democracy and a misconceptualization of capitalism, class, and other social relations of oppression. Much of this scholarship and policy literature is underpinned by a liberal ideology incapable of conceiving the constitutive coercive features of the capitalist market. Instead, the market is understood to require regulation at the margins, but it is ultimately understood to be a sphere of opportunities either to be seized or missed. Starting with the axiom of the market as the preeminent domain of freedom itself, liberal ideology cannot grasp struggles for *freedom from* the market. It thus misses most of what has been important about popular struggles in recent decades in Latin America. The chapter suggests as an alternative a combined Marxist and decolonial theoretical framework to approach inequality, one that attempts to encompass the totalizing power of capital and the complexity of class relations and other internally related social oppressions—gender, sexuality, race, and nation—in contemporary Latin American capitalism. The chapter grounds these theoretical discussions in concrete investigations of extractive capitalism and the militant biography of Luis Macas, an indigenous-Marxist dissident in contemporary Ecuador.

Chapter 4 explores the complex relationship between Marxism and Romanticism in the work of early twentieth-century Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui. Following Michael Löwy, it argues that there is a utopian-revolutionary dialectic of the precapitalist past and socialist future running through Mariátegui's core works. The romantic thread of Mariátegui's thought was in many ways a response to the prevalent evolutionist and economistic Marxist orthodoxies of his time. An argument is made that the fruitful heresy embedded in the Mariáteguist framework might suggest

the outlines for a theoretical research agenda to counter a novel orthodoxy emerging out of the state ideologies of the Andean new left in an era of intensifying extractive capitalism. Deploying a certain Marxist idiom, figures such as Bolivian vice president Álvaro García Linera defend as progressive the extension of large-scale mining, natural gas and oil extraction, and agro-industrial mono-cropping in alliance with multinational capital. Left and indigenous critics of this latest iteration of extractive capitalism in Latin America are condemned in this worldview as naive romantics, or worse, the useful idiots of imperialism. A creative return to Mariátegui allows us to read the opposition of left and indigenous critique and activism in a different light. What is more, we can see in the biographies of activists such as Felipe Quispe in Bolivia a concrete realization of the Romantic Marxist critique of evolutionism and economism being discussed theoretically in our exploration of Mariátegui.

Chapter 5 investigates the origins and outcomes of the student-worker rebellions of 2011–2012 in Chile. It argues that these remarkable mobilizations marked a before-and-after break in contemporary Chilean history. They introduced new elements into the common sense of Chilean society that broke with the neoliberal paradigm introduced under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet and consolidated under the post-authoritarian governments of the center-left Concertación coalitions. The 2011–2012 revolts were not reducible to student rebellion, although this obviously played a key part in the events. There were also various interconnections established in this period between the student movement and the revitalization of parts of the labor movement, Mapuche indigenous struggles, and socio-ecological resistance. Although the rebellions as a whole introduced a significant rupture in Chilean politics, the model of accumulation and political domination persisted in many respects. While the conservative government of Sebastián Piñera (2010–2014) provided a common enemy around which popular forces could easily cohere, the new center-left administration of Michelle Bachelet and her Nueva Mayoría (New Majority, NM) coalition, in office since 2014, has proved a more complicated antagonist. Bachelet ran on a platform to the left of her earlier presidency (2006–2010), absorbing key elements of the popular demands coming from below, even while consolidating relations with the dominant sections of capital in the country. The NM government has incorporated the Partido Comunista de Chile (Chilean Communist Party, PCC) and, crucially, many of its leading youth, who played such an important role in the rebellions of 2011–2012. In office, the overarching logic of the administration has been to introduce

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reforms at the margins, stabilizing political life and protecting the underlying fundamentals of the system of accumulation and the mode of political domination consolidated in the 1990s under the Concertación governments. It has sought to channel and disarm pressures from below, while surviving economic and political pressures from the hard right. Bachelet appeared to be eminently capable of such a dance for the first year in office, but 2015 has seen renewed instability, with charges of corruption coming from the right and a rebirth of the student-worker movement in the streets.

Chapter 6 examines the dynamics of the urban labor markets of Bolivia under Evo Morales (2006–2016) as a prism through which to characterize the class character of that administration. While the government of Morales rules in the name of indigenous workers and peasants, the chapter shows how in fact the country's political economy since 2006 has witnessed the ongoing subjugation of these classes. If the logic of large capital persists, it is legitimated in and through petty indigenous capitalists. The chapter argues that Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of passive revolution offers a superior analytical point of departure for understanding contemporary Bolivian politics than Álvaro García Linera's more widely accepted theory of creative tensions. However, the dominant manner in which passive revolution has been employed in contemporary Latin American debates has treated the sociopolitical and the ideological as relatively autonomous from the process of capital accumulation. What is necessary, instead, is a sharper appreciation of the base/superstructure metaphor as expressing a dialectical unity of internal relations between "the economic" and "the political," thus avoiding one determinism or another. Through a reading of Gramsci that emphasizes such unity, chapter 6 interrogates the dynamics of "extractive distribution," class contradictions of the "plural economy," and transformations in the urban labor market that have characterized Bolivia's passive revolution under Evo Morales between 2006 and 2016.

Chapter 7 also deals with Bolivia, but this time from the vantage point of the countryside. It begins with a survey of Bolivia's rural sociospatial dynamics. From this point of departure it then explores the historical development of agrarian capitalism across three historical phases: 1) the 1952–1985 period of nationalist import-substitution industrialization; 2) the period of orthodox neoliberal restructuring between 1985 and 2000; and 3) the period of contested neodevelopmentalism under Evo Morales between 2006 and 2016.

The chapter challenges the notion that there has been extensive, egalitarian reform in Bolivia since Morales assumed the presidency in 2006. Its argument hinges on the changing balance of agrarian class forces in Bolivian society and

the related changes in the class composition of the ruling MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) bloc over time. Initially, there was a period under Morales's rule, between 2006 and 2009, in which the indigenous peasant social movement alliance, the Unity Pact, fought from below for a genuine transformation of the Bolivian rural class structure, and in which the agro-industrial elite fought openly against the central government through an autonomist and regionalist destabilization campaign, headquartered in Santa Cruz and radiating outward through the rest of the lowland departments of the country. The main institutional terrain of struggle in these opening years of the Morales regime was the Constituent Assembly process, and there was a possibility during this period of deep structural reform to the countryside. However, by 2010 the Morales government had defeated the political project of autonomy in the lowlands, and this laid the basis for a class realignment in the ruling bloc. Between 2010 and 2016, a novel agro-capital-state alliance emerged, with subordinate support from rich peasants in the coca, soy, and quinoa commercial export sectors, among others. The Unity Pact fragmented, and the lowland indigenous movements were expelled from their earlier participation in the governing alliance.

Chapter 8 shifts our attention to Venezuela. It offers an analysis of the Bolivarian process under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) through an extended interrogation of George Ciccariello-Maher's influential *We Created Chávez*. The chapter argues that *We Created Chávez* is the most important book available in English proposing an anticapitalist framework for understanding the Bolivarian process in contemporary Venezuela, as well as its historical backdrop dating back to 1958. The book contains within it a laudable critique of Eurocentrism and a masterful combination of oral history, ethnography, and theoretical sophistication. It reveals with unusual clarity and insight the multiplicity of popular movements that allowed for Hugo Chávez's eventual ascension to presidential office in the late 1990s. *We Created Chávez* has set a new scholarly bar for social histories of the Bolivarian process and demands serious engagement by Marxists. As a first attempt at such engagement, this chapter reveals some critical theoretical and sociological flaws in the text and other areas of analytical imprecision. Divided into theoretical and historical parts, it unpacks some of the strengths and weaknesses by moving from the abstract to the concrete. The intervention begins with concepts—the mutually determining dialectic between Chávez and social movements; “the people”; and “dual power.” From here, it grounds these concepts, and Ciccariello-Maher's use of them, in various themes and movements across specific historical periods of Venezuelan political development—the rural guerrillas of the 1960s, the

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urban guerrillas of the 1970s, the new urban sociopolitical formations of the 1980s, Afro-indigenous struggles in the Bolivarian process, and formal and informal working-class transformations since the onset of neoliberalism and its present contestation in the Venezuelan context.