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Review

Understanding the Bolivarian revolution

Thomas Muhr

Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrández (editor), *Democracy, Revolution, and Geopolitics in Latin America*, Routledge 2014

This outstanding volume is a critical contribution to the ongoing struggle about how to make sense of the transformations that have taken place over the last two decades in Latin America and the Caribbean. Within academia this broadly takes the form of a struggle between the mainstream interpretations of comparative politics and (neo) realist international relations and a dissenting approach based on reflexive critical globalisation theory. The latter is not satisfied with description, bland criticism and prediction of the ‘what’: instead it seeks to explain the complexities of the why and how of social transformation.

These questions are addressed in this book by developing several pertinent arguments: that the Bolivarian Revolution is an inter- and transnational project of global scope and relevance; that ALBA, UNASUR and CELAC evolved through interrelated processes through Hugo Chávez’s leadership [1]; and that a profound democratisation – social, political, economic and cultural – of the Venezuelan state-society nexus has been underway for some time.

The book’s main themes are 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. One of the declared aims is to analyse the relation between the Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela’s foreign policy and current geopolitics, and thereby to reveal ‘the particular transnational quality that Venezuelan politics has acquired’ (p177). Angosto-Ferrández draws on Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s work to emphasise the cultural and discursive dimensions of (counter-)hegemony. While the existence of international system structures must of course be acknowledged, it is important to note that these are ‘constituted by identities and interests’, and are dependent on process: ‘structures do not pre-exist processes’ (p181). He also emphasises the role of inter-subjectivity in the construction of social reality. Equally importantly, Angosto-Ferrández recognises that discourse cannot be separated from material reality. The book thus transcends the bulk of ‘neorealist economy-based’ studies (p183), and avoids the popular voodoo-like attributions of Venezuela’s resource dependency (and that of other nations) to a ‘disease’ (‘Dutch disease’) or a ‘curse’ (‘resource curse’) (p184); instead it recognises that such dependency is the product of historical processes of colonisation and imperialism.

The following chapters analyse the Bolivarian project from different disciplinary angles. Some of these are of a more introductory nature, while others offer new research and ideas. The chapters by Tim Anderson, Anthea McCarthy-Jones and Rodrigo Acuña, respectively, provide comprehensive introductions to the ideological origins, contemporary discursive articulations and institutionalised expressions of the Bolivarian project in and beyond Venezuela, and are informative key readings for novices to the field. However they would have benefitted from a more empirically specific, and analytically and theoretically grounded discussion of the themes embraced by the book. These chapters are perhaps somewhat over-detailed in their narratives, and are overwhelmingly culled from secondary sources, with the occasional imprecision. This can sometimes lead to an uncritical reproduction of dubious journalistic claims, such as former Guardian correspondent Rory Carroll's writings regarding alleged 'broad corruption', non-transparency and non-accountability in Petrocaribe (pp77-8).

Other contributions are exceptional, however, and enter hitherto under-researched terrain. Kathryn Lehman's profoundly well-researched and theoretically grounded chapter looks at the Bolivarian Revolution's counter-hegemonic promotion of the collective right to information, in order 'to decolonize knowledge hierarchies' (p87), and she presents insightful case studies that link claims-making to issues within health, land, film and justice. Angosto-Ferrández also contributes his own chapter, which counterposes the idea of 'indigenous organisations' to that of 'indigenous movement', in order to highlight shortcomings in the use of the latter term in mainstream literature. Placing state-society relations at the centre of his analysis, he contests simplistic assumptions of state-society antagonism (and simplistic anti-statism), and criticises the mainstream idealisation of civil society and movements.

In their chapter, Michael Humphrey and Estela Valverde appear to contradict this important ontological and methodological insight: by associating the processes of state restructuring that are taking place in Venezuela with 'state recentralisation', the authors in fact reproduce the widespread notion of state-society antagonism. I would argue, however, that the colonial state structure is being transformed into what the Bolivarian discourse refers to as a 'Communal State'; and that, as communal self-government, this is the ultimate form of democratic decentralisation (which, paradoxically, the authors themselves also point to elsewhere (p165)). Nonetheless, their analysis of the processes of urban de-gentrification and socio-spatial restructuring of Caracas, which is discussed in relation to the Bolivarian counter-hegemonic security model, are pioneering and indispensable contributions to theoretical discussions of the Bolivarian project.

Because it combines introductory readings with specialist elaborations, this book is accessible to a general politically interested audience beyond academia. Beyond this, the book's value consists in its methodological innovativeness, the diversity of themes discussed, and its larger implications in the context of the crisis of global capitalism: only a holistic and inter-disciplinary analysis of this kind can contribute to a political strategy for socialist transformation. This is of relevance to Europe, where resistance to neoliberalism is growing. Thus the book is of particular interest to the open-minded reader truly interested in understanding the revolutionary transformations of Latin America and the Caribbean, and their relevance to counter-hegemonic globalisation: it

is an invaluable corrective to the patronising misrepresentations and outright dismissals of these transformations – and completely debunks the pejorative ‘Pink Tide’ label.

Notes

1. ALBA: Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America; CELAC: Community of Latin American and Caribbean States; UNASUR: Union of South American Nations.