

Book Review

- *The Class Struggle in Latin America: Making History Today*, by James Petras & Henry Veltmeyer. Routledge, 2017.
- *Latin America in the Vortex of Social Change Development and Resistance Dynamics*, by Henry Veltmeyer & James Petras. Routledge, 2019.

The 2000s witnessed a tremendous surge for Latin America's left-leaning social and political movements, initiated by the rise to power of Hugo Chávez in the Venezuelan presidential election of 1998. The books under review here address from a Marxist perspective the historical, political-economic, and political-sociological contexts of Latin America's development and leftism. *The Class Struggle in Latin America* (CSLA) scrutinizes the changing dynamics of class struggle against the background of the rise and demise of neoliberalism in Latin America. According to James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, the changing dynamics of Latin America's class struggle are largely contingent on the shift of the locus of class struggle from land and labour to dispersed communities representing indigenous people, adding to the increasing prominence of precarious, unemployed, and informal workers. Neoliberalism was also accompanied by the ascendancy of extractive capital and China as catalysts for the primary commodities boom of the 2000s. In explaining the negative socioeconomic and ecological impacts of rising extractivism (or excessive dependency on extractive capital), Petras and Veltmeyer refer to David Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession, understood as a process by which popular sectors are forced to abandon their communities. The authors go on to infer that despite their anti-neoliberal discourse, Latin America's left-leaning regimes drew their power mainly from expanded social policies, financed through extractive activities. This ideological paradox is explained by reference to the conversion of centre-left regimes into promoters of capitalist interests and continued foreign intervention in Venezuela. This in turn led to the cooptation of sectors of popular leadership away from their radical class demands through moderate reforms. Eventually, centre-left regimes failed to initiate a process of autonomous industrialization and the end of the commodities boom revealed the exhaustion of what the authors call "progressive extractivism."

In *Latin America in the Vortex of Social Change* (LAVSC), the authors supplement the arguments they advanced in CSLA with a theoretical and empirical engagement with the notion of imperialism. Veltmeyer and Petras emphasize that Latin America's current cycle of development is shaped by the dynamics of "monopoly capitalism" as a defining feature of contemporary imperialism; that is, the concentration and centralization of capital at unprecedented levels with the push of new communication and information technologies. According to the authors, the concentration and centralization process has been particularly dramatic in the agricultural sector, which has come to be dominated by the so-called "Big Six" (Monsanto, Dow, BASF, Bayer, Syngenta, and DuPont), hegemonizing biotechnological research and production. The contemporary manifestations of imperialism in Latin America also include the exponential growth of FDI flows into natural resources, which eventually led to an extractive phase of capitalist development in the region. Moreover, the authors argue that the rise of narcocapitalism via neoliberalism and the militarization of development aid constitutes another defining feature of contemporary imperialism. Not only have neoliberal restructuring and free trade arrangements such as NAFTA destroyed people's livelihoods; foreign-supported state violence against drug cultivation and trafficking has also served the interests of multinationals through accelerating accumulation by dispossession. Equally important is how major United States banks are closely involved in laundering drug profits from Latin America. A final manifestation of contemporary imperialism in Latin America is United States regime change efforts, which aim at installing client states by funding friendly non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Exemplary of these efforts is the funding provided by the National Endowment for Democracy as well as the Atlas Network, and Fundación Pensar, a pro-Macri think tank in Argentina. It is important to note that the Atlas Network was instrumental in the success of the soft coup against Brazil's former president, Dilma Rousseff.

Overall, the books under review are greatly to be welcomed; together, they represent one of the most comprehensive and up-to-date introductions to the Marxist position on Latin American development and leftism. They offer empirically rich content that addresses a broad range of cases from a multidisciplinary perspective grounded in political economy, political sociology, and international relations. Last but not least, Petras and Veltmeyer's books make a strong contribution to Marxist theory by demonstrating the inextricability of class analysis and imperialism in the Global South. This link has remained systematically underexplored by contemporary class theorists such as Erik Olin Wright. Petras and Veltmeyer's studies on imperialism and class complement recent research into geopolitical economy, which combines class and national perspectives on global hegemony and imperialism (e.g. Desai, 2013). Another crucial contribution is that Petras and Veltmeyer deepen and refine the monopoly-capital school of imperialism by revealing the role of monopoly capitalism in advancing the extractive phase

of Latin American development and colonizing civil society. The general trend under contemporary imperialism is ever-increasing centralization and monopolization, whereby accumulation by dispossession becomes the norm. Against this background, Petras and Veltmeyer's studies of Latin American development aptly describe how the imperialist system operates to retain and improve control over raw materials and labor in peripheral areas, to perpetually generate investment opportunities, and to expand the realm of accumulation. Petras and Veltmeyer also show the extent to which the non-profit sector has now grown to the point where it constitutes an integral component of today's imperialism and extractive capital, becoming a kind of pseudo-global civil society (see Gürcan, 2015). Written by two of today's leading Marxist scholars in Latin American Studies, these books will serve as general reference works for anyone interested in the field and as supplemental texts for graduate-level courses on Latin American development.

References

- Desai, Radhika. (2013). *Geopolitical economy: After US hegemony, globalization and empire*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gürcan, Efe Can. (2015). The Non-profit-Corporate complex: An integral component and driving force of imperialism in the phase of monopoly-finance capitalism. *Monthly review*, 66(11), 37-53.

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