

Book Review

– *Latin America Since the Left Turn*, edited by Tulia G. Falletti & Emilio A. Parrado, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018

Most edited volumes follow more or less the same recipe: an introductory chapter draws up a broad theoretical framework and some research questions; a set of rather disparate individual chapters are squeezed into the theoretical framework; and finally a conclusion desperately attempts to pull together all the loose ends. In contrast, *Latin America Since the Left Turn* makes no attempt to appear coherent. Its 15 chapters could each have been published in journals, but in widely different disciplines and theoretical traditions. It avoids consciously the most polemical debates about the left turn, and rather draws up a wide panorama of different issues relating to political, economic and social processes in contemporary Latin America. These are placed in the context of debates with roots far beyond the left turn of the last couple of decades. As such, this is a book about much more than the left turn and its aftermath; it is a book that introduces key debates in Latin American social thinking and social sciences in general. Since it avoids taking debates dominating Anglo-Saxon literature as a starting point, and includes diverse contributions from scholars based in Latin America, it is also a contribution to the “decolonization” of the literature, but in a practical terms, not through lofty declarations.

The first part focuses on national and regional models of development. It starts with a critical discussion by Maristella Svampa of development strategies under and after the left turn, dwelling particularly on neo-extractivism. The contrast is rather striking to the following chapter by Nora Lustig and Claudiney Pereira which speaks to a much narrower, but equally important debate about the impact of fiscal policy on poverty and inequality. Isabella Alcañiz discusses progress, shortcomings and changes of regionalization (focusing particularly on Mercosur) linking the developments to levels of debt, democracy and economic crisis. The section ends with a chapter on Mercosur and migration by Marcela Cerutti, which is evidently written before the Venezuelan exodus. However, with its focus on a combination of legal frameworks and real practices, it is of key importance to understanding how it is dealt with.

The second section is named democracy and its discontents. Again showing a refreshing disrespect for the regular edited volume format, it starts out with two, partly contradictory chapters on Venezuela. The first by George Ciccariello-Mahrer seeks to explain the Bolivarian Revolution as a process of transformation towards a dispersed form of communal power, admitting its tensions with liberal-representative institutions, but rejecting that it has destroyed Venezuelan democracy. David Smilde, on the other hand, uses Weber to move beyond the common analyses of the Venezuelan conflict that focus either on democracy, class conflict or economic policy. His “full conflict theory” gives a useful picture of the complexity of the conflict, implicitly also challenging the preceding chapter. Paulina Ochoa Espejo’s chapter is a useful contribution to clarifying the eternally contested concept of populism, challenging the dominating “rhetorical view” by focusing on “self-limitation” as the key concept that distinguishes liberal democracy from populism.

The third section on citizenship, constitutionalism and participation is equally rich in theoretical and historical perspectives. Roberto Gargarella places constitutional developments under the left wave in a historical context. He argues that in spite of the many recent constitutional initiatives, Latin American constitutions’ main features were defined in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century. Sandra Botero’s chapter on high courts answers “not really” on the provocative question in the title of whether high courts are agents of neoliberalism, but more interestingly, it argues that a part of the recent backlash against judicial rights activism can be explained by the politics of appointments and the elite’s increasing interest in shaping it. Thamy Progrebinschi’s chapter is more firmly based in traditional Anglo-Saxon political science. However, it challenges some of its conclusions by arguing that the participatory experiments of the left-turn have not signalled a radically shift, but rather a pragmatic accommodation with representative democracy. Gisela Zaremberg and colleagues use the reference of the Italian novel *Il Gattopardo* on the changes and continuities of Sicilian life of the nineteenth century, to argue why participatory and representative democratic bodies introduced in Mexico have failed to produce a real change.

The last section changes pace and tone altogether. Juliet Hooker’s re-reading of José Vasconcelos’ writings on *mestizaje* argues that his theories are explicitly anti-imperialist, but not decolonial, nor able to embrace multiple identities. Oscar Vega Camacho’s chapter focuses on the struggles of decolonialization and plurinationality in Bolivia. Rather than concluding about the success or failure of the processes, it gives us a deeper understanding of them and their long term implications. The same can be said about the last chapter on post-war El Salvador by Irina Carlotta Silber. It is rich on data on the horrible violence, but what leaves the strongest impression is the individual stories of not only violence and division, but also unexpected reconciliation and the building of new ties.

Those stories illustrate nicely this book's willingness to enter into the contradictions, complexity and unpredictability of political developments in Latin America. The left turn could never be explained solely through the lenses of class-struggles, democratic progress (or backlash), anti-neoliberalism or anti-imperialism, and neither can its aftermath. This book does not pretend to give the complete picture of Latin America since the left turn. Yet, for the reader that overcomes the first frustration of the lack of a clear and coherent argument, this book will provide a rich and thought provoking collection on the multiple realities of present day Latin America. In many ways, the reference to Rancière in Vega Camacho's chapter, could stand as the dictum of this book: "I would like to counter these analyses of the reign of the present from a completely different perspective: that of a time that is not framed by the sole speed of capital [...] Our world does not function according to a homogenous process of presentification and acceleration. It functions according to the regulation of the convergence and divergence of times" (Rancière 2012:23).

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