

Book Review

– *Deepening democracy in post-neoliberal Bolivia and Venezuela – Advances and setbacks*, edited by John Brown, Routledge, 2022

A most pertinent matter, without any doubt. These two most radical cases of the leftist turn in Latin America of the 1990 have already triggered quite some debate. It seems now a good moment to try and answer the question: what did they eventually deliver in terms of their solemn vow to end for once and for all the corrupt, excluding, rigged and elitist quasi-democracy their countries had inherited? The book has an introduction, a presentation of concepts and its approach in chapter 1, and subsequently three chapters for each country, dedicated to the chronology of events from the crisis of democracy in neoliberal eras to just about 2020. Finally, the eighth chapter is dedicated to the comparison and the conclusion.

Brown is quite straightforward in terms of the basic lines of reasoning. First of all, he sustains, that neoliberal policies in Bolivia and Venezuela were to blame for a shallowing of democracy, the increase of inequality and the crisis of the party system. This crisis was caused by the fact that the established parties would not allow for (new) parliamentary opposition and resistance to enter the political arena. Secondly, he contends that the rise of anti-systemic entities supported by social movement mobilizations would once elected in power, need to “centralize” policymaking rule and implementation, to counter the sabotaging strategies of elites that thus far benefitted from the market economy model. “Centralization” thus becomes a key term. Thirdly, this move towards centralization tends to develop, from (initial) progressive centralization, via regressive centralization to authoritarian centralization (p. 10 and *passim*). He adds that both market-economy advocates, often elites, and the new progressive governments implementing new strategies, may have bent liberal democracy standards – but that this does not mean that the latter, in doing so, have eventually not deepened and extended democracy. In other words: the classic liberal measuring sticks are not the only criteria to study and evaluate democracy’s variations: “liberal analyses offer only part of the story”(p. 12).

In the first, conceptual and research-strategy explaining chapter, Brown emphasizes that bringing in the voice of the popular sectors was key to him because

it modifies the parameters with which democracy should be evaluated. Again, he stresses that formal compliance with liberal minimal criteria says little about the qualities of democracy, especially when the underlying socioeconomic model, based on market economy principles, is shielded from real democratic deliberation and moreover, makes outsiders of impoverishing popular sectors even before they enter the democratic and voting arena. Neoliberalism “fosters unaccountable, technocratic decision making procedures dominated by capital and aligned supranational bodies” (p. 24). Also in this chapter does he explain the features of the three types of centralization. The progressive one uses power to resist the opposition blocking new redistribution measures, and simultaneously offers opportunity for popular sectors to intervene. The regressive one continues with the first characteristic but begins “to side-line or co-opt popular sectors that critique the direction of the left-led process” (p. 27). The authoritarian variant tends to begin to repress both opposition and originally supportive sectors and is inclined to manipulate unwelcome electoral outcomes. It is with the lens of this continuum of three types of “centralism” that the subsequent three chapters on Venezuela first and on Bolivia subsequently, are framed.

These trios of chapters have the same structure, which could be wrapped up as a sequence of “emergence, peak and relapse”. Especially chapters two and five, explaining the emergence of the MVR led by Chávez in Venezuela and the MAS led by Evo Morales in Bolivia, I found very strong and convincing. They extensively and very convincingly reconstruct how elitist unwillingness, trickery, manipulation and exclusion created the cradle for the party-movements of Chávez and Morales. In the subsequent Chapters on each country, Brown attempts to analyse the developments towards a more restrictive and eventually sometimes even outright oppressive government attitudes. He situates these transitions in the context in which they occurred, e.g. focusing on developments in which changing ideological, economic, military and political power balances co-produced the course of the policies of the governing parties. Another already mentioned constant factor in the author’s interpretations is that in evaluating democracy’s developments, elements like the receptiveness of the governing party, the redistributions favouring the popular sectors, and other measures responding to popular needs, should weigh also, next to the possible twisting of some of the allegedly sacred liberal democratic standards. We need to look broader in our assessments of the degree to which democracy indeed deepened and extended, or was curtailed. Exactly this becomes the central issue of the comparative chapter 8 and the conclusion.

Strong in this book is the meticulous reconstruction of the adventures of both governments, and the convincing argument that democracy is about more than, for instance, only the abstaining from governing by decree. Sometimes, when opposition really sabotages things, it is the only way; such measures “were justified – and popularly supported – as necessary to overcome the existing unequal balance in other spheres of power” (p. 215). This is because neoliberalism continues to be a threat to democracy whenever rulers “have become more

responsive to the concerns of global financial markets than to the needs of their own citizens” (p. 225). So, deepening democracy, in Brown’s view, takes place whenever “it seeks to tackle/overcome oligarchic power in order to advance an incorporation project that cumulatively deepens the scope for bottom-up inclusion in, and oversight of, decision-making processes” (p. 228). But setbacks are possible: in cases of tensions and fears for the return of the old elite, ruling sectors may become bigoted and place “loyalty to the party ahead of loyalty to the post-neoliberal process” (p. 197). An active social movement participation in the post-neoliberal process thus remains the key factor in what Brown would still coin a genuine “democratization”. I was left with some doubts, after reviewing the whole, about the trio of progressive, regressive and authoritarian manifestations of centralization. It seemed almost too logical and “orderly” for the consistent contextualization that is otherwise so central in the analyses of the empirical chapters. But I strongly recommend reading the book, to evaluate for oneself whether this friction is imaginary or real.

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