

## Review - Latin America's Radical Left

Written by Gemma McNulty

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# Review - Latin America's Radical Left

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### **Latin America's Radical Left: Challenges and Complexities of Political Power in the Twenty-first Century**

By: Steve Ellner

Rowman and Littlefield: Lanham, 2014

#### **Introduction**

Steve Ellner's, *Latin America's Radical Left: Challenges and Complexities of Political Power in the Twenty-first Century*, is an engaging and pertinent read for those within Latin American Studies and beyond. The book discusses all the central themes which we might expect from a book on the radical left including social revolution, social movement mobilisation and radical redistributive policy. However unlike previous work on the left, the authors move beyond the stagnant 'two lefts' thesis and instead provide a more nuanced discussion on the left in the region.

The 'two lefts' has its genesis in the work of Jorge Castañeda (2006) in which it was proposed that the new left in the region was comprised of the 'right' left in the form of President Lula da Silva of Brazil and the 'wrong' left as personified by the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. This distinction was re-labelled by various authors, including Vargas-Llosa's (2007) 'vegetarian' versus 'carnivorous' left, yet there remained little substantive or progressive debate about the meanings of these labels and their impact on our understanding of the left in the region. This book fills the gap by providing a comprehensive discussion on Latin America's radical left which is accompanied by strong theoretical underpinnings on the complexities of this left and substantiated by in-depth case studies of the radical left in power across the region.

By confronting a dominant yet problematic paradigm regarding our understanding of the left, Ellner and his contributors, redirect the conversation away from a 'two lefts' debate and instead ask more substantial questions about the performance of these leaders, some of which are almost a decade in power.[1] Therefore, regardless of your position on the radical left, this book is important because it steers away the stale good-bad debate and moves towards more substantive questions about governance, equality, diversity and democracy under radical left in the region.

#### **Overview**

The book is comprised of twelve chapters and divided into four sections. Each section is divided by preface by the editor to the topics covered. While these are relatively short, they tend to interrupt the flow of the book and serve as little more than summaries of the chapters to come. Subsequently, I am not convinced of their merit. The first section provides a comprehensive introduction of the theoretical and historical background of the radical left in the region. The second section provides case studies of the left in power in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. Interestingly, the third section examines the influence of the radical left in Central America which is often under-examined in favour of the 'poster boys' of the radical left (Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela). Indeed, this section presents some interesting points which do not often receive the attention they deserve. For example, in Chapter 7, Héctor Perla Jnr. and Héctor M. Cruz-Feliciano, describe how the variation in the types of leftist projects in Nicaragua and El Salvador can be explained by a variation in international allies. Nicaragua is closer to a radical left because of its relationship with the states within ALBA gives it the freedom to be so, El Salvador on the other hand is closer with the United States

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leading to a more moderate leftist project there. Piñeiro Harnecker's chapter on the internal debates regarding Cuba's future meanwhile raises the interesting point that to move forward Cuba should perhaps consider adopting the direct and participatory democracy model practiced by current radical left governments. This is interesting because it implies that the original 'bad' left (Cuba) should relieve itself from mentoring duties and instead adopt strategies of the new generation of 'bad' leftist leaders (personified by Chávez and the Chávista movement). Finally, in the fourth section of the book the authors examine more topical issues including the relationship between the economy, media and society and the radical left.

As an editor, Ellner has compiled an impressive array of established and burgeoning scholars as contributors. Marc Becker, for instance writes a particularly insightful chapter on Ecuador which manages to capture the complexity of the relationship between President Rafael Correa and social movements in a manner that is befitting one of the most established experts on Ecuador. Similarly, Federico Fuentes' chapter on Bolivia successfully disentangles the intricacy of social movement relationships with the Movement for Socialism (MAS) in light of contemporary conflicts surrounding the issue of the Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure (TIPNIS, a protected national park and indigenous territory). Burgeoning scholars such as George Ciccariello-Maher also provide valuable contributions. Ciccariello-Maher's work on Venezuelan politics, including his recent book *We created Chavez: A Peoples History of the Venezuelan Revolution*, makes him an authority on Venezuela but his chapter on social movements and the new left raises important questions about these relationships across the region. PhD candidate at the University of New York, Kevin Young also provides an important discussion on how the use of the 'good-left-bad-left' dichotomy within the press and academia in the United States distorts our understanding of the left in Latin America.

Interestingly, while the book manages to capture variation across established and upcoming scholars, of the thirteen contributors just two are women. Diana Raby provides an insightful chapter about the complexity and tensions between State, democracy and revolution which is useful beyond Latin America while Camila Piñeiro Harnecker's chapter maps out the options for Cuba's future in an era of the 'new left'. I do not suggest that the low number of female contributors is deliberative, nor do I believe it to substantively impair the quality of the book. It is nonetheless interesting and causes me to wonder if this is a reflection of gender imbalance within the field.

Ultimately, this is a highly engaging book and an enjoyable to read. For instance, the authors themselves often engage with contentions made by their fellow contributors, thus giving the impression that the debate is actively occurring in real-time and at your fingertips. Regardless of your position on the 'two lefts' thesis you are likely to find yourself commenting aloud, underlining passages and tabbing particular pages as you participate in the active discussion flowing throughout the book.

### Moving beyond the 'two lefts' thesis

The authors criticise the 'two lefts' thesis for being reductive, and therefore invalid. The chapters illustrate the ways in which Castañeda and others fail to consider the complexity and heterogeneity of the radical left and in doing so they raise some interesting points.

In Chapter 5, Federico Fuentes notes that upon the election of President Evo Morales in Bolivia, Castañeda (2006) claimed that if Washington "played its cards right", President Morales would "make news, but not history" (pg. 103). Given the recent re-election of President Morales despite Washington's disapproval, it seems that Castañeda overestimated US influence, and more to the point, underestimated the Bolivian electorate.

Indeed, the failure of Castañeda and others to consider the importance of social bases and movements is a central criticism of the book. In Chapter 10, George Ciccariello-Maher (pg. 228) charges Castañeda with "systematic neglect" of extra-institutional space and social movements. The author argues that it is by examining the relationship between movements and the parties that we uncover the true complexities of the radical left. For example, although considered by Castañeda as part of the 'good' left, former president of Brazil, Lula da Silva abandoned the movements who brought him to power once elected. Ciccariello-Maher asks that if one of the key determinants of the 'bad' left is empty promises "then surely, no left is worse than one that abandons or betrays its base once in power" yet he continues that this is the "sine qua non for entry into the good left" category when it comes to promises to

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political allies such as movements (pg. 223).

On the contrary, the 'bad' left seems to have fulfilled some part of the deal with the movements that supported them. In Chapter 5, Federico Fuentes explains how President Evo Morales fulfilled his promise to establish a plurinational state in 2009 and since then has raised awareness of indigenous issues globally through the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in 2010. The author recognises that social movements and the working classes have been a force of change in Bolivia and therefore held enough political leverage to pressurise Morales' into delivering on his promises (at least in the early phase of his term). For instance, Fuentes argues that Bolivia's move away from neoliberalism and extractivism "has only been possible due to the continued support and mobilisation of Bolivia's indigenous working classes" (pg. 121).

While the book challenges Castañeda in a variety of ways, I found these points particularly engaging and pertinent to our understanding of the left. As Ciccariello-Maher claims, determining who is good or bad among leftist governments depends upon "who leads it and how" (pg. 228) and in many cases social movements have played a part in the leadership, thus their omission from the discussion is problematic for those wishing to adopt such dichotomies.

### **Conclusion: More Questions than Answers?**

In the foreword of the book, William Robinson, a professor of sociology at the University of California, explains that in reality this book "raises more questions than they answer, and that is precisely their value" (pg. x). Good research should raise more questions than answers. The merit of this book is it challenges the binary understanding of the radical left and in doing so raises more substantive questions about these governments and their performance. The book manages to raise these questions without romanticising or demonising the radical left. There are no rose-tinted glasses, and some authors are critical of some policies. In Chapter 9, Thomas Purcell exposes some of the core problems with Social Production Companies in Venezuela through empirical evidence from the field. Marc Becker and Roger Burbach raise questions about political stability in light of movement-party relations within the radical left. Therefore, the book offers an honest and nuanced discussion of the radical left which will only elevate our understanding of these parties and their leaders, thus leading to better analysis.

Finally, throughout the book the contributors raise concern about the impact of labelling the radical left as 'bad'. As a Bolivian expert, it has often occurred to me how the categorisation of President Evo Morales as 'bad' impacts the perception of Bolivia and its peoples, particularly among those in the Global North with no experience of the region. If we categorise a country as 'bad', this will generate negative connotations that can be damaging to that country and its people, as well as trade and tourism. As Kevin Young addresses in Chapter 11, the good-bad classification is very much alive within the press in the United States thus reaching a mass audience and generating a distorted perception of the left in the region.

In the first section of the book the authors raise the issue that if the radical left are the challengers of global capitalism through alternative forms of governance and participation, then by categorising them as bad we are in turn categorising all challengers to global capitalism as bad. Federico Fuentes claims that in order to help strengthen movements in Bolivia and indeed the region we, in the Global North, must show solidarity with them rather than deriding them for challenging an economic and political model that is not desirable to the people. It is in this way the book manages to strike a balance between academia and activism by highlighting the 'real world' impact of the good-bad binary. While there are undoubtedly issues and concerns with the radical left, Steve Ellner concludes that these leaders are in an experimental phase and that it is practice rather than theory which will resolve the conflicts and disputes emerging from this approach. At least through this book we can analyse the radical left approach without the noxious glare of 'good' or 'bad', 'carnivorous' or 'vegetarian'. It is for this reason I will be recommending this book to my students of Latin American Politics, and to established scholars alike.

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[1] President Evo Morales was elected in 2006, President Rafael Correa was elected in 2007 and former President Hugo Chávez held power from 1998 until his death in 2013.

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### **About the author:**

Dr. Gemma Mc Nulty is Lecturer in Latin American Politics at Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. Her thesis explored the role of indigenous social movement mobilisation in the electoral success of the left in Latin America. Her research is primarily concerned with movement-party alliances, and their impact on electoral politics within Latin America, Europe and the United States. She has several articles under review informed by her thesis, including one with *Latin American Politics and Society*