

Review - Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America

Written by Laurence Goodchild

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LAURENCE GOODCHILD, AUG 4 2015

Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America: Breaking Up With TINA?

By: Tom Chodor

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

Regardless of its faults, the 'pink tide' label is now thoroughly established within the lexicon of political economy and IR/IPE. Much ink has been spilt over the range of leftist governments which the term refers to, both within academia and activist communities. Unfortunately though as the pink tide matures, a significant amount of literature continues to be heavily descriptive and superficial, or retraces ground which has already been covered. In contrast to this, Chodor's *Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America* analyses the regional situation through a stimulating theoretical framework which provides deeper understandings and distinctive conclusions. Most importantly, although Chodor contends that the Bolivarian Revolution is a radical counter-hegemonic project, and the governance of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) is a 'passive revolution', he emphasises that these projects find common ground at the regional and world levels as they work to build an alternative to US hegemony.

The first chapter of the book is dedicated to establishing a clear theoretical framework for the later analysis. Here, neo-Gramscian IPE is determined to be "the most profound and comprehensive account of politico-strategic relations in the global community in the early 21st Century"(p.3). Realist and Liberal approaches are swiftly dispatched with, dismissed for asking restricted 'problem-solving' questions of the world and ignoring fundamental questions of class and exploitation. Moving on, a revised Historical Materialism (HM) based on the insights of Antonio Gramsci is presented as the best approach to studying IPE. For Chodor, the key to this approach is the "radical social ontology" which underpins it; 'human nature' is defined by social relations rather than being an ahistorical pre-determined value. This position implies that reality is not structured by "iron laws of history" determined from an unchanging 'human nature', and can be radically changed through collective human agency (p.31). While this theoretical chapter does an excellent job of summarising a contemporary neo-Gramscian approach, and certainly engages well with criticisms arising from anarchist/post-hegemony perspectives, it may have been strengthened further if the author addressed more recent criticisms from within Marxism itself (Ayers 2013). Nevertheless, Chodor builds on the foundations laid by the likes of Stephen Gill (2008) to convincingly portray Gramscian HM as a theory which retains the strengths of Marxism, while overcoming the negative economic and positivist aspects of previous 'Marxisms'.

From this basis, the author moves on to examine the pink tide, beginning with a concise analysis of the main political and economic developments of 20th Century Latin America. Although there are numerous other texts which cover these broad developments in greater depth (Weaver 2000), the importance of this chapter lays in its Gramscian interpretation of historical context. Chodor skilfully applies his theoretical framework to the rise and fall of both Developmental and Neoliberal hegemony, providing an incisive overview which prepares the reader for his later chapters. Neoliberalism is portrayed as a complex project which gained tenuous hegemony in some countries due to its short-term alleviation of economic crisis, and an anti-state narrative which appealed to those who were tired of clientelism and corruption (p.77). Ultimately though the long-term effects of neoliberalism were disastrous for the vast majority of Latin American's, exacerbating economic and social problems, and leading to an 'organic crisis'.

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Consequently, the author suggests that there have been two prominent responses to this crisis. Firstly, there is the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela, which is characterised as “fledgling attempt to construct a counter-hegemonic alternative to neoliberalism and global capitalism”(p.91). Rooted in the “national-popular” context by indicating links with historical struggles, the Bolivarian Revolution is “opening up space” for the construction of 21st Century Socialism. Secondly, there is the governance of the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil which is characterised as “a passive revolution... which combines aspects of neoliberalism with neostructuralist developmentalist policies into a new, more inclusive historic bloc”(p.121). *Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America* covers the economic, political and social dimensions of each of these cases in a fairly comprehensive manner. But what stands out as a key strength is that both structure and agency are consistently accounted for in a balanced manner. This attention to ‘structural context’ leads to a position which rightly places the PT and Bolivarian Revolution “under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past”, and yet simultaneously highlights potential for transformation through collective agency and political will.

Although the contrast between radical and moderate elements of the pink tide isn’t novel, the book makes three distinctive propositions that should help further debate. Firstly, throughout these chapters Chodor emphasises the open-ended and contested nature of each of these projects. Although the Bolivarian Revolution has initially made a more radical departure from neoliberalism, it faces sharp internal contradictions which are once again coming to the fore. Likewise, while the PT’s passive revolution has only made minor reforms so far, it has none-the-less opened up new points of tension where more radical possibilities lie. Possibly reflecting the author’s post-positivism, the language used is cautious and we are regularly reminded that the future depends on “struggles yet to come” rather than structural certainties or iron laws of history (p.158). Secondly, Chodor argues that the Bolivarian Revolution and the PT’s neostructuralism intersect and find common ground at the regional level. Despite the differences in their national projects, these two states (understood in a broad sense of state-society complexes) are building an alternative regional order based on a new common sense that emphasises ‘endogenous development’, active social policies and greater independence from the US (p.147). As such, although Chodor distinguishes between the two projects in a similar vein to many other scholars (Ellner 2013; Harnecker 2015), he doesn’t do so in the simplifying dichotomous manner of Castaneda’s two lefts thesis (2006). Thirdly, Chodor’s demonstration that a new ‘common sense’ is being constructed and embraced by large sections of Latin America’s population highlights the importance of the ideological ‘war of position’ to the longevity of the pink tide. As an alternative vision is consolidated through institutions such as TeleSUR, opposition to the pink tide is often turning to coercive tactics which in many cases are proving to be ineffective.

Unfortunately, while the book ends with some insightful remarks on the potential for global counter-hegemony (p.177) these are very brief and remain undeveloped; a full chapter on this subject would complement the structure of the book well. One other minor complaint would be that while Chodor does fleetingly refer to the possibilities for anti-capitalist counter-hegemony, this is never fully addressed. Understandably, the author may not wish to rehash tired debates regarding ‘reform vs. revolution’ or compare contemporary processes to dogmatic models of socialism in a tick box manner. However, given the socialist rhetoric of the Bolivarian Revolution, deeper exploration of anti-capitalist potential beyond anti-neoliberal counter-hegemony would be of benefit (Muhr 2013).

Nevertheless, *Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America* puts forward a compelling case for how we should understand contemporary changes in Latin America. Eschewing simple generalizations, Chodor paints a nuanced picture which should set an example for future studies.

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