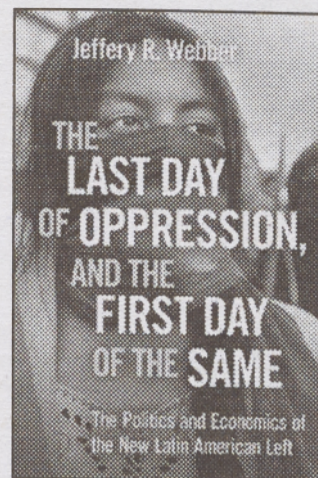


Global lessons from Latin America's left

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The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left, by Jeffery Webber

“constitutional coups.” A right-wing president was elected in Argentina. Leftist governments in Ecuador and Bolivia are still in power, but are having significant conflicts with the social movements that elected them.

Was the swing to the right inevitable? Not at all, says Jeffery Webber, in spite of the title of his book, “The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left.” The title is coined from an Ecuadorian saying that is roughly the equivalent of The Who’s famous lyric, “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.” Webber’s thesis is that the leftist governments in South America alienated their base and opened the door to the right by failing to challenge capitalism at its root.

Although specifics differ from country to country, similar patterns emerged:

In the early 2000s, South America was a beacon of hope for developing nations. In country after country — Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia and more — leftist or at least left-of-center governments came into power, supported by social movements of poor and indigenous groups.

Fifteen years later, Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution is in deep trouble. Brazil’s and Paraguay’s leftist presidents were removed through

Governments in the 1980s and 1990s inflicted economic hardship with neoliberal free-market policies and social movements organized to bring those governments down. In countries with dictatorships, democracy was restored. Free elections allowed left-leaning governments to come to power. Once in power, the new governments used revenues from oil, minerals and agriculture to fund social programs to start to eliminate poverty and give poor people a greater voice. This approach worked — to a point — mainly because commodity prices were high, fueled particularly by China’s rapid industrialization. But part of the reason it worked was that the rich elite were still able to make substantial profits, while government programs reduced social unrest. In most countries, the rich elite eventually made their peace with the new governments; those governments, in turn, incorporated portions of the upper class into their ruling coalition.

This approach to development had its downsides. Little was done to reduce these countries’ dependence on the world market by developing their own industrial base, leaving them at a disadvantage in the global division of labor. The dependence on oil, mining and export-oriented agriculture for government revenue pushed ostensibly progressive governments to expand corporate farming and large-scale mining into rain forests, leading to conflict with indigenous supporters and creating new entrepreneurs with an economic stake in an “extractivist” economy. Then, as China’s industrialization slowed down and the 2008 recession hit, revenues fell, reducing the amount of surplus available for social programs, which threatened the leftist parties’ base and brought them into conflict with the rich elite.

Webber’s chapters are semi-independent essays, some having to do with analyzing a specific country, some more focused on theoretical issues of development and social



PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
People in Sao Paulo, Brazil, turned out to protest Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution in May. Many leftist governments in South America are struggling.

revolution. His detailed analysis of the economic program of Evo Morales’ government in Bolivia — one of the most promising of the leftist tide in South America — convincingly demonstrates the divergence between the rhetoric of social change and what really happened on the ground.

Most of the other chapters are more abstruse; the book is mostly written in academic Marxist terminology, barely understandable to anybody outside that theoretical framework. Apparently, Webber’s intended audience is other academicians rather than people in the social movements or even the governments he describes. This is a pity, because the lessons from South

America seem applicable to countries across the globe, shedding light, for example, on the failure of the left in Greece to find a solution to their economic crisis. Unlike some Marxists, Webber works to incorporate the dynamics of race and gender into his analysis, though the discussion is often quite abstract.

Many radical discussions of developments in Latin America focus mainly on the culpability of the U.S. and corporations in disrupting democratic processes and preserving inequality and corporate profits. Webber’s focus on the internal dynamics in these countries is helpful in understanding why this outside intervention is inevitably successful. Webber also distinguishes himself from radical commentators who suggest that the state is inherently corrupt and that social movements should organize only outside it, rather than trying to take power. He agrees with Daniel Bensaïd, who said that, “You can pretend to ignore power, but it will not ignore you.”

What does Webber think leftists in power should do? Some of that is implicit in his analysis: transform government to give social movements control; deepen democracy; avoid co-optation, corruption and bureaucratization; build an industrial base independent of international capital. The likely outcome, however, is not defined very well. Webber finds promise in Peruvian Marxist Jose Carlos Mariategui, who looked to indigenous methods of organization as forerunners of socialist transformation. But one suspects that Webber, like many of his Marxist colleagues, doesn’t believe that single countries, or even regions of the world, can successfully extract themselves from exploitation without a world revolution. Even if they’re right, there needs to be a vision for what countries such as Bolivia or Brazil can do in the meantime.

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