

Book Review

– *The Latin American crisis and the new authoritarian state*, by Manuel Larrabure, Routledge, 2023

A central question in the literature on the Pink Tide period of Left politics and government in Latin America is how to conceptualize the relationship between social movements and Pink Tide governments. One interpretive framing has been to understand the Pink Tide as a “second incorporation” based on extending social citizenship rights through state social programs to larger numbers of citizens as a response to the myriad of social movements that reacted against neoliberal policies in the 1990s and 2000s (Silva & Rossi, 2018). On the other hand, authors from different perspectives have argued that Pink Tide governments are a rerun of twentieth-century populist governments which co-opted social movements and served to shore up export-oriented extractive economies that did not differ fundamentally from neoliberalism. In this book, Manuel Larrabure develops an alternative interpretive framework to analyse state-social movement relations during the Pink Tide by comparing the cases of Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela. He argues that a common feature of all these cases is the “post-capitalist” (2023, p. 4) orientation of the social movements. Larrabure defines “post-capitalist movements” as involving “the production and distribution of use-values through the articulation of new forms of cooperation and democracy that point beyond capitalist social relations” (Larrabure, 2023, p. 4). Larrabure’s concept of post-capitalist movements is remarkably similar to the concept of the “pre-figurative” activities of social movements as the “construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present” (Yates 2015, p. 1). While I was not convinced that the four movements studied in this book are best understood as “post-capitalist,” this book is nonetheless an important contribution to the literature on the Pink Tide for the theoretical space it navigates, the synthetic review of the literature it provides and the empirical breadth of the four case study chapters.

The book has eight chapters in total, including four empirical chapters on each country, the second chapter that lays out the theoretical framework and the third and fourth chapters, which consider authoritarianism and compare historical economic indicators in the four countries, respectively. Chapter two charts

the theoretical space Larrabure navigates in this book, rethinking orthodox Marxism and vanguardism by integrating insights from Nicos Poulantzas and Paolo Freire to theorize what he calls “a new democratic road to socialism” as an attempt to rethink orthodox Marxism and top-down and “vanguardist” revolutionary versions of Marxism which Larrabure argues need to be rejected (2023, p. 38). The vision of alternative or non-capitalist/post-capitalist forms of organization has been part of a long history of debates about the socialist transition from the “utopian socialists” and the critiques of Marx and Engels of these earlier thinkers, and I thought Larrabure could have engaged a bit more with this history in this chapter. The other main theoretical concept and empirical phenomenon the book explores is the authoritarian turn in the region under Pink Tide governments, in particular Nicaragua and Venezuela, and right-populist leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. Larrabure revisits Guillermo O’Donnell’s concept of the “bureaucratic authoritarian state” (2023, p. 13) to make sense of these shifts in chapter three. I thought the concept of an “anti-bureaucratic authoritarian state” that wields power through “the deepening of social fragmentation and even chaos that deepens the neoliberal logic” (2023, p. 47) that Larrabure put forward in chapter three was a particularly insightful and astute concept to make sense of the current era of right-wing politics and authoritarianism in the region.

Larrabure develops his argument about the post-capitalist nature of different social movements through a comparative study of four social movements under the Pink Tide governments. The four cases include the Empresas Recuperadas por sus Trabajadores (ERTs) or Worker Recuperated Enterprises and the Kirchnerista governments in Argentina; the free transit movement during the 2013 mass protests in Brazil during the Worker’s Party Presidency of Dilma Rousseff; the Chilean student movement from its emergence 2006 to the election of Gabriel Boric in 2021; and the case of Venezuela’s state-supported social economy through a study of a Socialist Production Unit (SPU) in Chavez-era Venezuela. These four chapters are empirically rich as standalone contributions. However, as an overall comparative study, I was left with doubts about whether “post-capitalism” explains the ideational and strategic orientations of the four movements. In my view, the book’s main weakness is that the concept of “post-capitalism” had weak explanatory power across all the cases.

An alternative way of organizing the comparison of the four cases in this book could have been through a similar/different comparative analysis, approaching the analysis as comparing a pair of apples with a pair of oranges. Here, the cases of Argentina and Venezuela share similarities, as do Chile and Brazil, with the pairings differing from one another two in similar ways. For example, the mass mobilizations galvanized by the free transit movement in Brazil and the student movement in Chile might be better explained as citizenship struggles for the expansion of public services in the context of capitalist states and societies, more in line with Silva and Rossi’s (2018) concept of the “second incorporation” across the region. Though Larrabure points to post-capitalist ideologies amongst

the leadership in both cases, based on their activities and goals, I think they are more accurately conceptualized as what Larrabure argues these movements are not: “struggles for citizenship or a larger piece of the economic pie” (2023, p. 4). By contrast, I think the concept of post-capitalism has more explanatory power in the cases of Argentina and Venezuela. Rather than demanding an expansion of public goods from governments as in Brazil and Chile, the movements in both Argentina and Venezuela are more prefigurative of post-capitalism as initiatives for social economy production (in this sense, both cases could be considered ‘oranges’ compared to the ‘apples’ cases of Chile and Brazil).

In the book’s concluding chapter, Larrabure argues that none of the movements studied in the book were successful in pushing forward their projects for “post-capitalist future[s]” because none of them were “sufficiently embedded in the construction of new political organs that could extend the post-capitalist dynamics to broader layers of society” (2023, p. 40). In short, these movements could not solve the perennial question of political parties and state power in various theories of socialist transition (which, from non-Marxist social democracy to revolutionary vanguardism, all emphasize the centrality of state power in social transformation). Here, Larrabure could have addressed the shortcomings of post-capitalist strategies and the prefigurative politics and social movements in anticipating the failures of social movements compared with political parties and could have considered the links between the two in greater depth. At the same time, I agree with Larrabure that social movements remain essential for the “intersubjectivity” (2023, p. 134) they help to construct in society, which is a crucial antidote to the “political nihilism” (2023, p. 90), which feeds the contemporary wave of right-wing populism across the region. This book is essential reading for anyone studying the Pink Tide and is accessible enough to be assigned for undergraduate courses in Latin American politics, sociology, or social movement studies.

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References

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