

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Rethinking Latin America: Development, Hegemony, and Social Transformation by Ronaldo Munck

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In synthesis, the book is a good antidote to a common perspective on development studies that focuses exclusively on local issues, specific problems and ready-made solutions, and calls for subjecting again capitalism and business to academic scrutiny.

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Ronaldo Munck, *Rethinking Latin America: Development, Hegemony, and Social Transformation* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 254, £55.00, hb.

*Rethinking Latin America* is an ambitious reinterpretation of 500 years of Latin American development and social transformation. This reinterpretation is grounded in a (heterodox) Marxist critique of capitalism, drawing heavily on the writings of Antonio Gramsci, José Carlos Mariátegui (who 'Latinamericanised' Marx), Karl Polanyi, and, to a lesser extent, Michel Foucault.

A general approach to Latin America grounded in three 'framing concepts' is suggested (p. 2). These framing concepts form the subtitle of the book: development, hegemony, and social transformation. In terms of development Munck examines modernisation theory, dependency theory, neoliberalism, and post-colonial studies; concluding that the dependency tradition works well in understanding the nature of Latin America's role in the global division of labour, but only when the internal, or endogenous, sources of that dependency are included in the analysis. This facilitates a focus 'on the formation of and struggle among social classes leading to the development of specific relations of production' (p. 3). This leads onto the second framing concept, that of hegemony. Through the application of hegemony and hegemonic struggle as understood by Gramsci, Munck is able to trace the history of Latin America in terms of class struggle, the creation of (partial) hegemonic historic blocs in different epochs of Latin American history. In turn, the third concept of social transformation is revealed as ongoing changes in the composition of social forces in their struggle over development and hegemony. Significantly for Munck, as hegemony was only ever partially constructed by shifting formations of social forces across the region over time, then social transformation has a concomitant partial and ongoing character as the terrain of hegemony and counter-hegemony is constructed at the site of class struggle.

Having established these framing concepts in the introduction, Chapter 1 seeks to begin the process of 'rethinking Latin America' through 'placing' the continent in a conceptual, rather than geographical sense (p. 8). Is Latin America developed or underdeveloped, modernising or dependent, part of the global North or global South, an outpost of Europe or the West located elsewhere? Munck concludes that rather than thinking in these binary terms, Latin America should be understood in terms of its social hybridity – 'which places it betwixt and between different worlds' (p. 8). This observation justifies the application of Gramscian concepts to Latin America, as many countries in that continent are structurally the same as the European peripheral states that Gramsci himself was concerned with: incomplete development of the bourgeoisie and the state, the fragile nature of dominant class hegemony, and their semi-peripheral status in the world capitalist system. This mirrors the framing concepts as set out in the introductory chapter. Focus on dependency relationships is important, with endogenous forms of dependency as important as exogenous ones. This nicely maps the contours for the historical, economic, political and social

analysis that follows, chronologically, in Chapters 2 through 6; giving a continental view of Latin America from 1510 to 2010. Finally, Chapter 7 is a broad retrospective (and simultaneously a way forward), grounded in a perspective of Latin America as having been 'always-already' globalised (p.12) and therefore already inscribed in the current era.

Historically, during the colonial era, Latin America was a constitutive part of the making of European modernity and the Atlantic economy: it was not a place apart waiting to be integrated into the emerging world order. In the current period, the focus of Chapter 7, Munck explores the implications of the preceding historical retrospective. Has the national development path been rendered obsolete in today's globalised world (p. 12)? For Munck, the answer to this important question is not clear, with his analysis oscillating between optimism and pessimism; perhaps mirroring his Gramscian leanings through the oft quoted 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'.

Munck suggests that Latin America today is important globally because it is a laboratory of social and political transformations that might just help us imagine a path out of the current economic recession and political paralysis: 'There is much original thinking and political practice emerging that could be useful to a broader constituency as the world grapples with the failure of easy globalisation and the re-emergence of classic capitalist contradictions that had never really gone away' (p. 13). Alternatively expressed, in the developed world the answer to a crisis of neoliberalism has been more, and deeper, neoliberal reform; whilst in Latin America experimentation with alternative policy toolkits has been more pronounced. However, Munck goes on to claim that it is a 'moot point' whether Latin America has moved into a post-neoliberal world in the twenty-first century or just witnessed a transformation of the doctrine into something more viable (p. 181). This claim is due to the fact that neoliberal reforms from the previous century have already achieved their objectives of carrying out a wide reaching reconstruction of the institutional basis of society in an attempt to fashion a depoliticised, individualistic and market driven society.

So which is it? Challenge to the neoliberal hegemony of development thinking or a project doomed to failure in the face of already existing fundamental transformations towards market societies? This tension is not simply the product of Munck's analysis, as it permeates the whole literature on post-neoliberalism. In a typically eloquent and insightful intervention the dominance of a Jorge Castañeda style 'good left' and 'bad left' model is rejected: '[t]his is essentially a neo-colonial perspective with its view of the good native who has learnt his [sic] lessons well and the rebellious, still part savage, colonial who will revert to type, spend money he [sic] has not earned, and make false promises to the people, all held together by a dubious non-rational, non-European type of charisma' (p. 174). However, Munck does not attempt to build an alternative conceptualisation in its place. In other words, he does not offer a comprehensive theory of the post-neoliberal state; perhaps because he concludes that Latin American post-neoliberalism does not entail coherence or convergence in the existing alternatives.

Whilst I must be careful not to impose my own research agenda, and its search for just such a comprehensive theory of the post-neoliberal state in Latin America and beyond, on to my reading of this book, it is a notable lacuna in the analysis. Nevertheless, *Rethinking Latin America* represents an invaluable contribution and important marker on the path towards such an achievement.

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