

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

The pseudo-left's appraisal of the "pink tide": A recipe for further betrayals

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The period of domination by Latin America's nationalist-populist governments known as the "pink tide" has come to an end.

The rise of the traditional right-wing parties in the Argentinian election of 2015 and the impeachment of Brazilian ex-president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 mark a historical inflection point with profound geopolitical implications. Nearly 20 years after the election of Hugo Chavez ushered in a supposed turn to the left in Latin America in 1998, the region is still the most unequal in the world. The political fate of the pink tide is symbolized in Venezuela, where an embattled Nicolas Maduro is fighting to prolong chavista rule through repression directed against both a resurgent right wing and food riots of malnourished and impoverished workers and youth.

Among a variety of self-proclaimed socialist publications and political groups worldwide—many of which were initially cheerleaders of the pink tide governments—the end of this period has provided occasion for reflection.

One recent book in particular has gained widespread acclaim among this layer: Jeffrey R. Webber's *The Last Day of Oppression and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left*.

The book is an agglomeration of the worst threads of Latin American petty-bourgeois radicalism. The author proposes the construction of populist supra-class political movements based on a regionalist romantic utopianism and a rejection of philosophical materialism and of the revolutionary role of the working class.

Webber is a Canadian academic who teaches at Queen Mary University of London. He is a regular contributor to the International Socialist Organization's (ISO) *International Socialist Review* and received his political education as a member of the Canadian New Socialist Group.

His new book is published by the ISO's Haymarket Press and was featured as the subject of a roundtable discussion at the Historical Materialism conference in New York on April 22. An article Webber wrote previewing the book (titled "Assessing the Pink tide") was featured by *Jacobin* on April 11 and republished by the Pabloite *International Viewpoint*. In recent weeks, he has spoken at UC Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard University, and his book has received praise from a range of academics.

The book is worth reviewing as a textbook of everything socialism is not.

Populism vs. socialism

Webber's book has received a warm response from academia and the upper-middle class "left" because he adopts their anti-socialist perspective, advancing a method of analysis that rejects the division of society into classes defined scientifically by their relationship to the means of production.

Though Webber defines himself as a Marxist, he adopts categories of social analysis that have nothing to do with Marxism. There are "at least three social forces," he says. These include "the rural and urban popular classes and oppressed groups," which are progressive, plus the "the domestic ruling classes," and "imperialism."

The "popular classes" are determined not by whether its members' are forced to sell their labor power to survive, but by their gender, race, and sexuality, which Webber calls "types of social oppressions." While social class is one factor in determining the degree of oppression, members of the middle and upper classes can join the ranks of the progressive "popular" social force depending on the color of their skin, their sexual preference, or their gender.

Webber rejects the predominant role of economic class in determining membership in the "popular classes." He writes that various forms of personal identity "are not mere epiphenomena [i.e. byproducts] of class structure, nor are they reducible to class exploitation."

He explicitly attacks those who claim social class is the primary dividing line in society, quoting York University professor and *Jacobin* contributor David McNally:

"Too often, Marxist critics of the particularism at the heart of personal-identity politics have modeled their notions of working-class unity on the form of unification that characterizes capital. As a consequence, they offer up an abstracted concept of class that is indifferent to the diverse forms of experience in capitalist society—and hence one whose experiential purchase is minimal."

To claim a particular social class has a progressive content (i.e. the working class), would be as erroneous as claiming individual leaders like Hugo Chavez or Evo Morales can bring about revolutionary change, Webber says.

Quoting Drexel University Professor George Ciccariello-Maher, Webber asks: "And what steps in to replace the Big Man as subject of history? Is it the working class...? For Ciccariello-Maher, such a class-analytic alternative would seem to amount to the same kind of reductionism as methodological individualism, albeit in a different register: 'Or, is the very concept of a historical subject—a single bearer of future history, be it an individual or a class—far too unitary and homogenizing to accurately explain contemporary Venezuelan dynamics.'"

No amount of academic language can cover the unserious character of

this argument, which draws the most reactionary conclusions from the pink tide period and chavismo. Webber and Ciccariello-Maher equate the claim that individuals like Chavez and Morales can alter social relations on their own with the Marxist conception of the working class as a revolutionary social force. To the contrary, Marxists understand that working class is a revolutionary social force because of the position it occupies under capitalism as an exploited class which sells its labor power and produces profits for a small class of capitalists in a complex, interconnected system of socialized production.

Rejecting the working class as a progressive social force, Webber proposes the establishment of a broad anti-class, populist movement that would be led by sections of the affluent Latin American upper-middle class.

The aim of such a party would be to subordinate the interests of the broad masses of workers and peasants to the demands of this more privileged layer for a more equal distribution of resources among the top ten percent. Syriza and Podemos are their model. These bourgeois parties, based on defending the material interests of the upper middle class, have carried out austerity measures on behalf of the European banks in Greece and Spain.

To provide ideological cover for his proposal for the establishment of populist, anti-socialist and anti-working class parties, Webber recycles a series of ideological tropes used by the 20th century's Latin American renegades from Marxism.

Romantic idealism vs. materialism

Jeffrey Webber is not the first academic associated with Latin American petty bourgeois radicalism to argue that scientific socialism is too "deterministic" because it understands social consciousness to be a product of social being, rooted in the objective relations of classes to the capitalist mode of production.

Webber urges the left to avoid "returning to any crude economic reductionism or determinism," and writes that "the contradictions of capitalist accumulation" should not be "understood here as economic laws operating separately" from politics.

"What is necessary," he says, citing Zapatista-linked academic John Holloway, "is an adequate conceptualization 'of the relation between the economic and the political as discrete forms of expression of social relations under capitalism;' with the 'specificity of the political and the development of political forms firmly [founded] in the analysis of capitalist production.'" He adds that "the actions of the state are not the mechanistic expression of an economic law of capital."

Webber is employing an argument refuted 126 years ago by Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov in "The Materialist Conception of History." By presenting society as the product of a series of interrelated abstract "factors," (i.e. "the political," "the state," and "the economic") Webber "dismembers the activity of social man and converts its various aspects and manifestations into separate forces."

Plekhanov opposed Webber's 19th century predecessors who created a straw man and labeled Marxists as "economic determinists." He explained that "factors" are less detached from social relations and world economy than they may seem:

"The methods by which social man satisfies his needs, and to a large extent these needs themselves, are determined by the nature of the implements with which he subjugates nature in one degree or another; in other words, they are determined by the state of his productive forces. Every considerable change in the state of these forces is reflected in man's social relations, and, therefore, in his economic relations, as part of

these social relations."

Webber rejects scientific socialism for "a revolutionary romanticism" based on the "utopian-revolutionary dialectic between the precapitalist past and the socialist future" (p.106). This anarchistic, anti-Marxist theory is associated with the works of Peruvian ex-Communist Jose Carlos Mariátegui.

Quoting the French-Brazilian Pabloite academic Michael Löwy's "The Romantic and the Marxist Critique of Modern Civilization," Webber expresses the anti-scientific, irrationalist character of Latin American romantic utopianism: "The trajectory of Marxism after the death of Marx, according to Löwy, has been dominated by a productivist, economic, and evolutionist determinism, a 'modernist' Marxism that 'took over only one side of the Marxian heritage and developed an uncritical cult of technical progress, industrialism, machinism, Fordism, and Taylorism. Stalinism, with its alienated productivism and its obsession with heavy industry is the sad caricature of this kind of 'cold stream' in Marxism (to paraphrase Ernst Bloch)."

These arguments are not new. A primary obstacle in the development of a revolutionary socialist movement in Latin America today is the damage to social consciousness done by the decades-long domination of petty-bourgeois "romantic" utopianism embodied in Webber's reference to Löwy.

The post-World War Two period has produced many "revolutionary" movements whose underlying nationalism and anti-working class character led them to adopt variations of radical idealism. The different threads of guerrillaism, anarchism, syndicalism, and popular frontism defend their rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class on the grounds that orthodox Marxism is, in the words of Löwy, an "uncritical cult of technical progress" that is too "hard" and for the "romantic" nature of the population of Latin America.

The idealist argument, based on the pseudo-scientific notion that the population of Latin America has a different "human nature" than the rest of the world, is inextricably linked to the politics of nationalism. Utopian idealism seeks to develop a national myth as an ideological cover for subordinating the interests of the working class to those of the national bourgeoisie, often in the form of idealization of a prior national hero, like Jose Marti for Castro, Simon Bolivar for Chavez, Emiliano Zapata for the Zapatistas, Tupac Amaru in Peru, Farabundo Marti for the FMLN, Sandino for the FSLN, etc.

The development of a genuine Marxist revolutionary leadership in the Latin American working class requires a relentless struggle against the kind of nationalist and idealist framework advanced by Jeffrey Webber and his predecessors. The rebuilding of a revolutionary movement in Latin America must take as its starting point the fight to unite the working class of South, Central and North America, already joined in the transnational process of production, in a common struggle to put an end to capitalism.



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