

Lessons from the Pink Tide period

# Jacobin defends bourgeois rule and US imperialism in Latin America

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The “Pink Tide” period in Latin America is a central political experience of the last quarter century. After twenty years of populist bourgeois rule, the region remains the most unequal in the world. Poverty remains the dominant factor of life for most of Latin America’s 500 million residents.

American and European corporations continue to extract the region’s resources and exploit its cheap labor as American imperialism expands its military footprint from Mexico to the Southern Cone. When commodity prices crashed in 2014, the base for the expansion in social spending collapsed with it. Taking advantage of growing popular dissatisfaction with the Pink Tide, right-wing parties have come to power and have begun implementing unprecedented attacks on workers’ wages, living conditions, and social programs. For the working class of Latin America, Pink Tide rule has been a disaster.

The US pseudo-left, whose politics express the interests of an affluent upper middle class layer, sees matters differently. Its outlook is expressed in the Spring 2017 edition of *Jacobin* magazine dedicated to analyzing the Pink Tide period, titled “By Taking Power.”

## A defense of the Bolivarian bourgeoisie

“This issue isn’t a post-mortem on the Pink Tide,” *Jacobin*’s introduction announces. The edition begins with a debate between the International Socialist Organization’s Eva Maria, Venezuelaanalysis.com’s Gregory Wilpert, and Brooklyn College Professor Naomi Schiller; the three contributors rain praise on the Pink Tide governments, in particular of Venezuela under the rule of Hugo Chavez and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

“Chavez put socialism back on the international agenda,” says Wilpert, whose web site is the primary English language defender of the Venezuelan government.

Eva Maria states, “What Chavez represented was the first big ‘fuck you’ to neoliberalism in the region.” She adds, “I mean, I wish I had met the guy. I was inspired by his government.”

In the edition’s introduction, *Jacobin*’s editors are forced to acknowledge that the region is embroiled in a historic crisis. They explain that their goal is to determine “what went wrong.” Latin America’s present crisis is the product of “mistakes” made by Chavez’s successor, Nicholas Maduro, and by other Pink Tide heads of state, who “took the easier route, relying on commodities instead of confronting elites,” they claim.

A July 8 article published in *Jacobin* and the ISO’s *Socialistworker.org*

titled “Being Honest about Venezuela” takes up this point. The academic Mike Gonzalez writes, “the crisis in Venezuela represents a complete rejection of the Bolivarian revolution.” He bemoans that the PSUV and military “have become” right-wing “instruments of control.”

The juxtaposition of Chavez as “revolutionary” and Maduro as “rejecting the Bolivarian revolution” is false.

Chavez came to power as a representative of a faction of the Venezuelan ruling class, and his government has enriched a layer of capitalists and military officers known as the *boliburguesia* or Bolivarian bourgeoisie. The PSUV government maintained capitalist property relations and protected the “right” of corporations, both foreign and domestic, to exploit Venezuela’s workers and extract its resources.

If Chavez was “revolutionary,” where was the revolution? Chavez was not brought to power by a wave of strikes, factory occupations, and mass demonstrations. He won the 1998 election on a reformist and explicitly pro-capitalist platform with the support of Venezuela’s military. The PSUV carried out a temporary expansion of social spending by *increasing* the country’s dependency on exporting oil to foreign governments and corporations, laying the basis for the present social catastrophe.

When the bourgeoisie deploys the coercive force of the state against the working class in order to advance the interests of the banks and corporations, it is not a “mistake,” as *Jacobin* claims, but an illustration of class rule under capitalism.

## An apology for US imperialism

In another article from the spring edition, titled “The Empire’s Amnesia,” *Jacobin* advances the position that the US is no longer an imperialist exploiter of Latin America.

The question is posed to the article’s author, NYU Professor Greg Grandin: “Does it make sense to understand US-Latin American relations today as imperialist? If not, what’s the best way to describe them?”

Grandin replies: “I try to avoid those debates. It is what it is.”

A *Jacobin* questioner praises former US President Barack Obama, noting that he “seemed to have little interest in Latin America, although at the end of his presidency he did make a move to improve relations with Cuba.”

Grandin responds, noting positively that “Obama’s was a transitional presidency in terms of Latin America.”

*Jacobin* dedicates another section of its spring edition to warning of the rise of China. In one section of the magazine titled “Red is the new red, white, and blue,” *Jacobin* says China has replaced the US as the region’s

primary exploiter and has emerged as “the new superpower in the region.” While the US has done bad things in the past, *Jacobin* argues, the US took a backseat in 2015 when “China surpassed the US as the largest investor in the region.” While Grandin previously refused to label the US as an imperialist power, the implication from this article is that China is imperialist.

*Jacobin* says, “As the Pink Tide recedes, Chinese investors are starting to find friendly collaborators in Latin America’s resurgent right.” To tell this “story of global realignment,” *Jacobin* cites from eight documents signed between the Chinese government and Chinese corporations and Latin America governments. The conclusion is that China is engaged in “a mammoth land grab,” a “lurch to the right,” and “an escalation.”

There is perhaps no region of the world whose internal politics has been so dominated by an imperialist power like Latin America by the United States. It is not possible to list here the crimes US imperialism has committed in Latin America, where the total number of people killed by US invasion or by US-backed death squads and dictators is in the millions. Since 1898, the US has launched up to 100 invasions, interventions, and coups in the region.

Today, the US military retains bases or military installations in Cuba, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru, and Puerto Rico. It also has soldiers deployed in Brazil and Mexico for training “anti-drug” units who routinely murder civilians. In addition, the US military has funded local government bases in Belize, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Panama.

As for Obama’s role, he oversaw the coup of Honduran president Manuel Zelaya in 2009 and deported roughly 2 million immigrants to Latin American countries. Not a single one of *Jacobin*’s articles in the spring edition deals with the crisis facing immigrants.

Efforts by Chinese capitalists to extract Latin America’s primary resources are not progressive, but the purpose of falsely labeling China as the main “superpower” in Latin America is to provide a pseudo-left justification for deepening US intervention, both economic and military, as part of the US’s “pivot to Latin America.”

### **Praise for pro-austerity politicians**

In the article “Not going back” by graduate student Hillary Goodfriend, *Jacobin* features the story of Lorena Peña, former president of the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly and a leader of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN was the popular front organization that conducted the military fight of anti-government forces against the US-backed military dictatorship lasting from 1979 to 1992.

Today, the FMLN functions as a bourgeois party. It has held control of the Salvadoran executive branch since 2009 and is one of two major parties in the legislature. Goodfriend says: “Lorena Peña and a generation of FMLN militants adjust to the promise and limits of state power.”

The 2009 presidential victory of the FMLN was “a historic, unprecedented achievement,” Goodfriend writes. Peña is lauded as a “feminist champion” who embodies this advance.

While “efforts to dismantle the neoliberal economy and redistribute wealth have been stymied,” Goodfriend writes, “this is not to say that the FMLN has not made gains.” The article quotes Peña, who says: “We have truly won so many impressive achievements in these seven years.”

Peña “routinely goes to bat against the IMF’s demands,” the article continues. Despite the hardships, Peña “remains determined, optimistic even. The only match for the economic and political powers conspiring against the Left, Peña says, ‘is the power of the people...’”

*Jacobin* fails to mention that Peña is a political pawn of the IMF and is

responsible for slashing social programs in El Salvador. As current president of the Economic and Budgetary Commission in the Legislative Assembly, she led the effort to pass the FMLN’s 2017 budget. When foreign credit agencies demanded El Salvador speed-up payment of its foreign debt, Peña called for further cuts, which were passed in April. These cuts included millions of dollars to education and healthcare funding. The bill also cut electricity subsidies and the Environmental Ministry’s budget.

Peña defended the cuts, saying they were “very well thought through,” and would be implemented “in a very responsible way.”

*Jacobin* has nothing but praise for this right-wing politician who is responsible for slashing social programs upon which some of the world’s poorest people rely. Their laudatory coverage provides an insight into their own political aspirations. In the US, Latin America and elsewhere, the pseudo-left see themselves playing a similar role as Peña in El Salvador, or in other countries where left-populist governments have imposed austerity, like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

### ***Jacobin* defends the capitalist state**

According to *Jacobin*, the conclusion “activists” must draw from the Pink Tide period is that the state is *not* an organ of class rule.

“I think the example of the Bolivarian process forces us to revisit our assumptions about social movements and the state,” Schiller of Brooklyn College writes. “We can’t just think of poor people as always necessarily up against state power and the state as always necessarily an enemy of the people.”

In essays on the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) government of Evo Morales in Bolivia and the Workers Party in Brazil, the academics Linda Farthing and Sabrina Fernandes respectively describe the two governments as “contradictory.” The fact that they are bourgeois and pro-capitalist does not preclude political support for these governments because they initially expanded social programs.

*Jacobin* employs abstract, supra-class categories of analysis that have nothing to do with Marxism. Their defense of the Pink Tide governments is a defense of bourgeois class rule. Schiller spells out *Jacobin*’s anti-socialist theory of the state in greater detail:

While “capitalist interests continued to sit at the root of many Venezuelan state institutions,” she writes, “...there was also fierce competition over what the future of those interests should be, just as there was fierce competition over the class character and leadership of those institutions. We need to understand the Venezuelan state during the Bolivarian process as a ‘processual state’—not a clear-cut entity with an obvious and unitary interest, but a terrain of struggle.”

In Schiller’s view, a government based on capitalist property relations isn’t “necessarily” opposed to the interests of the toiling masses. These apologetics for bourgeois rule are exploded by the objective logic of political developments.

In the nearly 20 years they have held power, the Pink Tide governments have violently broken workers’ strikes, forced through environmentally devastating corporate mining operations against the opposition of indigenous communities, and handed over billions of dollars to Wall Street creditors in interest payments. In country after country, police chiefs, judges, and wardens appointed by “socialist” and “left” parties attack, convict, and jail strikers and protesters who stand in the way of the corporate drive for profit.

## The Marxist conception of the state

*Jacobin's* anti-socialist portrayal of the state as an organ of class reconciliation—a “terrain of struggle” between the classes—is nothing new. In his 1917 work *State and Revolution*, Vladimir Lenin replied to the petty bourgeois self-proclaimed socialists of the last century who sought to “correct” Marx in this way.

“According to Marx,” Lenin wrote, “the state could neither have arisen nor maintained itself had it been possible to reconcile classes...According to Marx, the state is an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another; it is the creation of ‘order,’ which legalizes and perpetuates this oppression by moderating the conflict between classes.”

Lenin makes clear that those who view the capitalist state as a “terrain of struggle” are hostile to socialism. Referring to the Menshevik and Social-Revolutionary parties’ support for the bourgeois provisional government that rose to power after the February revolution of 1917, he wrote:

“That the state is an organ of rule of a definite class which cannot be reconciled with its antipode (the class opposite to it) is something the petty-bourgeois democrats will never be able to understand. Their attitude to the state is one of the most striking manifestations of the fact that our Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks are not socialists at all (a point that we Bolsheviks have maintained), but petty-bourgeois democrats using near-socialist phraseology.”

*Jacobin's* repudiation of the Marxist conception of the state as an organ of class rule is not a mistake. Rather, it reflects the class interests of the privileged upper-middle class layers on whose behalf they speak.

The reactionary political implications that flow from this perspective are expressed most clearly by the ISO’s Eva Maria, who notes that Hugo Chavez “was being influenced by the masses. But *that’s where the question of the Left comes in*. The masses could influence Chavez through spontaneous, explosive actions. But *there wasn’t a coherent enough counterforce on the Left* that could really push him forward in any sustained way. So, as a result, Chavez was able to move his ideology here and there and here again, depending on whatever suited the moment.” (Emphasis added).

In Maria’s own words, the role of the pseudo-left is to “push” and “influence” the ruling class, directing social opposition into what Naomi Schiller called the “fierce competition” over the “leadership” of the institutions of the bourgeois state.

A central lesson workers must draw from the Pink Tide period is that the fight for socialism cannot be conducted through the bourgeois state, which is the coercive, armed body of the ruling class. The state is an instrument for the exploitation of the oppressed classes, comprised of “special bodies of armed men”: prosecutors, judges, prisons, police spies and intelligence agencies, military units, propaganda organs, tax collectors, etc.

Socialists do not seek to transform the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie by struggling for control of its “institutions.” Socialism requires the abolition of capitalist property relations and the destruction of the state apparatus used by the ruling class to prosecute its interests.

Lenin had harsh words for “all these gentry” who “repudiate outright the dictatorship of the proletariat and pursue a policy of undisguised opportunism.” He wrote: “Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat. That is what constitutes the most profound distinction between the Marxist and the ordinary petty (as well as big) bourgeois. This is the touchstone on which the real understanding and recognition of Marxism should be tested.”

It is on this basis that the fight for socialism in Latin America and internationally must be carried out.



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