

Book Review

Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America

By Eduardo Silva

Cambridge University Press. 2009. 336 pages. \$89 cloth, \$28.99 paper.

Reviewer: Gerardo Otero, Simon Fraser University

Eduardo Silva's book sets out to explain the discrepancy between neoliberal expectations about "the end of history" after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the fact of widespread mobilization challenging neoliberalism in Latin America since the turn of the 21st century. Mobilization did emerge with demands for deeper, participatory democracy and economic justice. Similar to most political scientists studying Latin America, Silva sets up a highly top-down, Weberian conception of "relational power." He focuses on what state structures are to be weakened for antineoliberal mobilization to succeed. Although there is an attempt to explore the bottom-up determinants of mobilization, in the form of "cognitive and brokerage" mechanisms to form collective power, these variables remain merely defined and described but not explained. They appear as structural functions that disrupt political power, but the author gives no clue as to how they emerge.

Silva posits that economic and political exclusion resulting from neoliberal reforms became the motive or the detonator for mobilization. Movements in Latin America have been antineoliberal and pro-state interventions, but not socialist. He calls for distinguishing between structural and institutional capacities, on the one hand, and mechanisms for movements to frame and broker coalitions and alliances to form collective power, on the other. Silva focuses on Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, where mobilization went from waves of contention to the ouster of neoliberal governments. He also discusses Chile and Peru, where different structural conditions did not lead to widespread mobilization or the ouster of governments, to explain his theory.

Silva's key argument builds on Karl Polanyi's now classic formulation about market society, based on the British long 19th century through World War I. The systematic attempt to install the market as a self-regulated mechanism led society to build a counter-movement to protect itself. Protective movements took a variety of shapes in different societies, from bottom-up contestation in the form of unions, to a variety of top-down responses like the welfare state, fascism or state socialism.

In Latin America, it took a military dictatorship in Chile to install neoliberalism and "market society" in the 1970s. But it was emerging liberal democratic

governments that adopted neoliberal policies in most countries after the debt crisis of the early 1980s, with Mexico leading the pack. International capitalism's demands were to hold down labor costs, liberalize production, trade and the financial sectors. Conversely, it punished governments that tried to steer the economy. The collapse of the Soviet bloc by the end of the 1980s led to decreased socialist mobilization. Instead, there was a democratic ascendance along with economic liberalization. Old social movements based on the working class and the peasantry were out in Latin America, with declining national-populist governments, and structural declines in working class positions resulting from economic restructuring. New social movements led to fragmentation, and in Latin America, they were not so new as they also posited materialist demands.

The attempt to impose a market society in Latin America generated anti-neoliberal mobilization, from waves or episodes of contention to the ouster of governments. A useful history of the transition from import-substitution industrialization to neoliberalism is offered. The objective stress created by neoliberalism provided the "motive" for mobilization, given that political exclusion had stripped populist channels for demand making. Silva thus sets four conditions for mobilization: associational space, economic crisis and ideological power (cognitive and brokerage mechanisms), and whether mobilization is reformist or revolutionary, with only the former having a good chance to ouster the government.

Antineoliberal demands by social movements included economic protection for individuals and groups at the workplace, education and health, citizen participation in policy making, better political representation and anticorruption measures, as well as constitutional assemblies. These demands countered the neoliberals' hope that market society would be internalized ideologically. Silva contradicts himself in regard to indigenous movements. On page 45 he says that postmaterialist and identity demands were partially met, at no cost, as they were symbolic; but on page 49 he says that indigenous organizations did mix economic and cultural grievances. The latter point is right, which has made indigenous struggles particularly difficult to sort out by states and ruling classes.

Chapters 4 to 7 offer good historical accounts of the waves of contention in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, all leading to government change, and Chapter 8 explains why no similar contention was present in Chile or Peru. The key is that in these countries, mobilizations were quelled by heavy-handed state repression, including Pinochet's coup in 1973 and Fujimori's self-coup in 1992. For the other four cases, Silva looks at how popular sectors enhanced their organization in response to the damaging impacts of neoliberalism. One could say that his is a fairly economic account, as neoliberalism is portrayed as the "motivating" factor for masses to engage in disruptive and contentious politics. After President Kirchner rose to power in Argentina and introduced reforms, for instance, mobilization died down. In sum, reformist mobilization paid off, and the more radical movements became isolated. The "pay off" was not just for the masses but also for the ruling classes, who once again got political stability. Results of mobilization in Bolivia and Venezuela, however, were different from those in Argentina and Ecuador, as they have altered ownership

of national resources and reduced external dependency. Reforms in Ecuador and Argentina may be described as “pink” left, in that they have been milder than the more radical ones in Bolivia and Venezuela.

The concluding chapter is rambling and repetitive, shifting the focus from contention to state formation. The overall author’s motivation comes out clearly on the side of seeking what mainstream political scientists are after: what works best for political stability and order. Political scientists are divided between those who favor stability over participation and reform, and Silva’s conclusion is that reform does the trick best, while violent movements lead to failure. A particularly interesting insight regards the use of repression. When presidents resorted to excessive force against demonstrators, they tended to lose control over the armed forces and the police, particularly in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia.

Theory and evidence are for the most part compelling and this book represents a welcome addition to the literature. It could be used fruitfully in graduate political sociology courses both for its substantive interest as well as an exemplar of how political scientists study social movements. There is an interdisciplinary thrust to this book, incorporating insights from sociological research, but the main problematic is one of political stability and order. Silva, however, forcefully favors reform and participation, rather than repression, as the best means to accomplish these goals.