

The present state of the left in Latin America

Pablo Velasco reviews
 "Utopia Unarmed: the Latin American left after the Cold War" by Jorge Castañeda (Mexico 1993; published in English by Vintage 1994)

JORGE CASTAÑEDA is a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and a leading theoretician in Mexico's (social-democratic) Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

In this book he argues for a "Grand Bargain" or "historic compromise" by the left, in which "business can expect substantial concessions from labour" in return for "municipal and national democracy" and "a social market economy" which will solve the "riddle" of growth with equality. His argument highlights many of the problems facing the Latin American left.

After the fall of the Soviet Union the Communist Parties in the area ceased to be a "significant force". However, as Castañeda explains, the CPs in the area have been in decline from as long ago as the 1930s. Stalin's popular front policy resulted in alliances with bourgeois groups and the heading off of social struggles. After the Second World War the communists were rewarded for their "moderation" by being repressed by Latin America's right-wing regimes. Some CPs experienced growth during the radicalisation of the 1960s but this was short-lived.

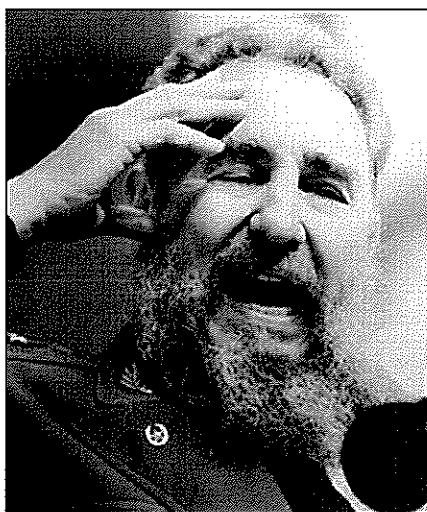
The nationalist-populist movements have also declined. Vargas in Brazil, Lazaro Cardenas in Mexico, Peron in Argentina and the APRA in Peru, led governments and sometimes presided over important industrialisation by using the state as a lever. Increasing global economic interdependence has made such "national development" unviable.

Castañeda has a certain sympathy for the political-military organisations: the Nicaraguan FSLN, the El Salvadorian FMLN and the Cuban Castroite regime but he criticises Castro for imprisoning his opponents, the FSLN for helping itself to some of the state's assets after electoral defeat and the FMLN for settling its internal differences with bullets. The armed struggle is on the wane in Latin America. Many of these groups have fragmented, and some have spawned new social-democratic groupings.

Castañeda paints up the reformist currents as having "the better chance of providing answers". Castañeda identifies the PT of Brazil, the PRD in Mexico, the Chilean Socialist Party and the MAS in Venezuela as part of this trend. (In doing so he glosses over impor-

tant social differences between workers' parties like the PT on the one hand and a bourgeois party such as the PRD on the other)

Castañeda's concept of the "left" is very woolly, and this reflects a long-standing trait of Latin American left politics: "left" is pretty much identified with "nationalist". At the recent Sao Paulo Forum of left parties from across Latin America, in the interests of the "broadest possible unity", the President of the Inter-American Development Bank was invited, the Mexican PRI (65 years in government) was granted observer status and the Free Bolivia Movement (which supported a crackdown on striking miners and teachers earlier this year) was allowed to remain in the conference. The Zapistas were not invited to the Forum, and the Ramirez wing of the Sandinistas was excluded at the behest of Daniel Ortega's wing.



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Castañeda remains attached to the assumptions of "dependency theory", which has been the dominant model on the left for explaining Latin America. It can be summarised as follows: Latin America is neo-colonial; capitalism can only bring underdevelopment there; local business classes are impotent; democratic channels for reform are completely lacking; development and socialism are thus synonymous.

The working class in this theory, and this is explicitly endorsed by Castañeda, is usually considered either too small numerically to be a major social force, or too privileged to have a stake in revolutionary transformation — unlike the rural and urban poor.

Using dependency theory, the Castroites (and later the FSLN, FMLN etc) repudiated the two-stage theory of revolution put forward by the Communist Parties (Latin American countries needed a bourgeois democratic revolution first and only then could they proceed to a socialist revolution). There would be only one revolution, socialist by definition, although in fact it would be

won through armed struggle in which petty bourgeois intellectuals would lead "popular" forces such as the peasantry and install a Stalinoid regime (modified by one degree or another of liberalism).

Many post-Trotsky Trotskyist versions of permanent revolution, (for instance, Adolfo Gilly's classic text on the Mexican revolution of 1910-17, *The Interrupted Revolution*) turn it into something very close to dependency theory. It is not difficult to see why so many of Latin America's Trotskyists ended up as little more than cheerleaders for the Castroites, Sandinistas et al.

Castañeda is in fact a proponent of a continued, perhaps more thorough-going, bourgeois "revolution" in Latin America. He is also a nationalist despite his criticisms of crude anti-Americanism (he points out that some of the most ardent supporters of change in Latin America live in the States). This is because nationalism "still mobilises... like nothing else". For Castañeda the movement, or rather the size of the movement, is everything, the end is nothing.

Castañeda's account of regional capitalist development, derived as it is from dependency theory, is the most unsatisfactory part of his book. During the 20th century, and certainly since the Second World War a number of countries in the region — Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Chile — have moved on from being semi-colonies, and have become important capitalist powers. These are the strongest capitalist powers in the regions — we can call them sub-imperialist. The ruling classes are more independent of larger imperialist governments, the working-class has grown and has often built powerful organisations and the peasantry has been proletarianised. These societies are far from being semi-colonies, as the dependency theory would have it. Castañeda veers between seeing these changes as either ephemeral, and therefore not fundamental, and simply ignoring them.

Among the ruling classes of Latin America neo-liberal policies of privatisation and free trade have replaced the old statist/developmentalist policies of the populist parties of the past. Lacking independence from the old bourgeois policy — nationalist populism — Castañeda represents a whole swathe of the Latin American left which has shifted from attempting to push the old policy a bit to the left to trying to push the new policy leftwards. Hence his social-democratic "Grand Bargain".

Capitalist development in Latin American has brought with it "its own gravedigger" — the working class. The left should be looking to the working class to solve the problems of Latin American society. This lesson has been demonstrated by the emergence of a powerful workers' movement in Brazil over the last 15 years. It is from this starting point that a new Latin American left can emerge to fight for socialism. ■