LARR Latin American Research Review

Knight, Alan. 2019. Revolution and the Left in Latin America. *Latin American Research Review* 54(3), pp. 772–783. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Revolution and the Left in Latin America

Alan Knight
University of Oxford, UK
alan.knight@lac.ox.ac.uk

This essay reviews the following works:

Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions. By Marc Becker. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017. Pp. viii + 256. $39.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781442265875.

Sandino: Patria y libertad. By Alejandro Bendaña. Managua: Anamá Ediciones, 2016. Pp. v + 472. $49.90 paperback. ISBN: 9789992475485.

Salvador Allende: Revolutionary Democrat. By Victor Figueroa Clark. London: Pluto Press, 2013. Pp. x + 164. $22.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780745333076.

Insurgent Marcos: The Political-Philosophical Formation of the Zapatista Subcommander. By Nick Henck. Raleigh, NC: Editorial A Contra Corriente, 2016. Pp. 311. $19.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781945234033.

Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America: An Oral History. By Dirk Kruijt. London: Zed Books, 2017. Pp. xvi + 287. $27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781783608027.

Picturing the Proletariat: Artists and Labor in Revolutionary Mexico, 1908–1940. By John Lear. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 366. $29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477311509.

La esperanza and el delirio: Una historia de la izquierda en América Latina. By Ugo Pipitone. Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas; Taurus, 2015. Pp. 551. ISBN: 9786071137678.

These seven books deal, in very different ways, with the Latin American Left, chiefly in the twentieth century. Three, by Alejandro Bendaña, Victor Figueroa Clark, and Nick Henck, are biographical and tell the story of iconic figures of the Left: the Nicaraguan patriot caudillo Augusto César Sandino (1908–1934), the Chilean socialist Salvador Allende (1908–1973, president of Chile 1970–1973), and the Mexican guerrilla leader and ideologue Rafael Guillén, better known as Subcomandante Marcos (b. 1957). Two books, by John Lear and Dirk Kruijt, deal with groups that played a part in major social revolutions: the radical artists who caught the wave of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1940) and the young radicals who joined the Cuban Revolution and embarked on long careers in the socialist state it engendered. Finally, the two books by Marc Becker and Ugo Pipitone are more sweeping, cross-national studies of Latin American radicalism: the first, a textbook introduction to the major revolutions of Latin America; the second, an ambitious survey of the Left through the long twentieth century—that is, from nineteenth-century origins to twenty-first-century outcomes. I shall deal with the seven volumes in that order, roughly from the more biographical and particular to the more collective, comparative, and general.

Bendaña's ample (568 pages) and impressive *Sandino* is a valuable but idiosyncratic book. Written from an unapologetically Sandinista standpoint by an author who has published extensively in the field of "Sandino studies," it builds on decades of scholarship. Though forthrightly positive in its treatment of Sandino, it is serious, scholarly, and heavily laden with facts, quotes, and footnotes culled from a massive range of sources—primary and secondary, old and new, both pro- and anti-Sandino. These sources, in both Spanish and English, are used critically, not simply to support a preconceived case. However, readers—especially

"academic" readers, keen to chase up citations—will be frustrated by Bendaña's citation system, which involves long, composite footnotes relating to entire paragraphs, if not pages, of dense text and often further laden with facts and observations; as a result, it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to extract the provenance of a particular fact, quote, or opinion from these overloaded portmanteaus.

Bendaña pursues Sandino's brief but busy career in great detail: from his origins in Nicaragua, through his early Central American travels and his first, influential sojourn in Mexico (1922–1924, a period which, alone, gets 110 pages); then back to his home country and the initial campaigns against the Conservatives and their American allies in the Segovias; his return to Mexico, now as a celebrated but frustrated political exile rather than an anonymous migrant worker; and his final Nicaraguan swan song, when the US marines departed, a flawed peace agreement was concluded, and Sandino was assassinated by Somoza's National Guard. A rounded and convincing portrait emerges of a wayward but resourceful young man who took to the road, soaking up experiences (and acquiring practical skills) in both Central America and Mexico; an autodidact intellectual who read widely and eclectically and who, on the basis of both experience and reading, cobbled together a heterodox political philosophy that blended Marxism, liberalism, anarchism, spiritualism, freemasonry, cooperativism, nationalism, "Indo-hispanismo," and anti-imperialism. Along this detailed narrative path, Bendaña pauses for interesting and generally convincing discussions: of anarchism (and the inherent tension between anarchism and nationalism); of the appeal of theosophy and spiritualism (a feature of Latin American political dissent that several historians have signaled but which mainstream accounts, some teleologically focused on Marxist antecedents and precursors, still largely overlook); and of the convoluted diplomacy—involving Mexico, the United States, Central America, and the USSR—in which Sandino finally became fatally ensnared, not least as victim of the Comintern's self-interested sectarianism.

Though avowedly sympathetic to his subject, Bendaña manages to avoid crass hagiography. He recognizes Sandino's stubbornness (evident in his somewhat churlish treatment of his *hondureño* ally Froylán Turcios), his final weary fatalism, and his apparent inability—admittedly, in difficult circumstances—to choose trustworthy collaborators and interlocutors. But if the portrait turns out to be sympathetic, an obvious explanation is that Sandino exercises an understandable appeal as a courageous and idealistic leader who overcame serious setbacks and, against great odds, mounted a dogged struggle against a corrupt regime and an overweening Great Power. He also had the good fortune—good, that is, in respect of his posthumous reputation—to die young, betrayed by erstwhile allies, without taking power and succumbing to its temptations: the fate of Zapata (but not, to take a counterexample, of Sandino's compatriot Daniel Ortega, who lived long enough to enjoy and abuse power).

Though generally convincing, the book is sprawling and selective. Sandino's military campaigns in the Segovias—the basis, after all, of his fame and reputation—are scarcely mentioned (hence, of the five mini-maps in the book, only two [210, 405] relate to Nicaragua and they are pretty useless). If Bendaña considers the military story sufficiently well known to warrant omission, he doesn't make it clear, and it would seem to be a rash assumption. In contrast, his treatment of Sandino's early career, his experiences in Mexico, his evolving political philosophy, and his personal life (including his love life) is detailed, at times prolix. Thus, while Mexico, and its recent revolution, had a major impact on the young Sandino (it was, he declared, "our great school" [115, 320]), assessing Mexican influence is inherently tricky and involves rather too much speculation (about what Sandino did or read), as well as slabs of quotation (e.g., 111) and long digressions (for example, into B. Traven—a slippery source—or the anarchist drama *Tierra y libertad*, which Sandino may or may not have seen [66–68, 74–76, 103–107]). Perhaps not surprisingly, given the mass of data crowding these dense pages, there are a good many minor errors: "Victoriano" (instead of Adolfo) de la Huerta; "Pedro" (instead of Maxim?) Gorki; "Sequeira" for Siqueiros (58, 97, 206), as well as some lax citations, the latter including both Shakespeare and Abraham Lincoln (13, 210). (Honest Abe did not say "over time you could fool everybody" and he certainly did not say anything like this in his Gettysburg Address.) But these are minor blemishes in what is a major achievement: a compendious and deeply researched biography of a key figure of the Latin American Left, which, if it says little about his military accomplishments, expertly evokes the man and his beliefs.

In contrast, Figueroa Clark's biography of Allende is much briefer (164 pages) and brisker. It forms part of a "Revolutionary Lives" series which, the blurb says, offers "critical biographies of radical figures … books that are sympathetic but not sycophantic." For once, the blurb is not hyperbolic hot air. Figueroa Clark has produced a clear, succinct, and generally convincing portrait of the Chilean socialist president—the only elected Marxist president in the Americas (or the world, for that matter?). The author makes no bones about his sympathy for Allende and his doomed project, but he does not shrink from criticism and his account, though necessarily concise, is generally well substantiated. Furthermore, he devotes ample attention to the historical formation of the Chilean Left and of the Socialist Party and Allende's role within it, placing

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the brief, turbulent years of the Popular Unity government (1970–1973) within a broad historical context. The 1973 coup thus appears as a tragic culmination, explicable in terms of the Socialist Party's radical trajectory (which sets Chile apart from most Latin American polities), the chronic divisions of the Left, the countervailing strength of the Right, and the failure of the Christian Democrats (or, to put it more bluntly, their Faustian pact with military *golpistas*). Neither Allende nor Popular Unity are put on a pedestal; nor, of course, are they plunged into an outer limbo of benighted Bolshevism.

As a rounded biography, the book covers Allende's life as well as his final political apotheosis: his early medical training (21, 28–30); his brief entrepreneurial ventures (from milk bars to fish meal) (53); his somewhat raffish lifestyle (which could be crudely summed up as "wine, women, and song"—as well as sailing); and his strong commitment to a brand of democratic Marxism, Allende being the "inheritor of liberal, rational and materialist thought going back to Democritus and Heraclitus" (49). To which could be added a feature of Latin American *políticos* of Allende's generation that their recent successors have largely lost: a strong grasp of national—and Latin American—history. As bombs rained down on the Moncada Palace, Allende ordered the presidential guard to "knock down all those shitty old men," referring to the plaster busts of Chile's past presidents, except for Balmaceda and Pedro Aguirre Cerda—the latter being the victorious Popular Front president of 1938, and Balmaceda a Chilean president who, like Allende, had committed suicide when facing armed overthrow (130). Figueroa Clark's account addresses—and indicts—American policy and, by way of conclusion, places the "greatest responsibility" for Allende's fall on the United States (144). Yet the preceding narrative gives ample evidence of domestic factors that weakened the Left and emboldened the Right, showing—correctly, I think—that Chilean political history should not be seen as a simple reflex of Cold War geopolitics.

The author's grasp of the story seems sure; errors are rare (the IWW are "Industrial," not "International" [19]); the style is clear, if sometimes inelegant; and, as the blurb proclaims, the treatment of Allende is sympathetic without being sycophantic. There is, however, little by way of broader comparative analysis. (Why was the Chilean Socialist party so radical? Why was Chile, of all the Latin American nations, the pioneer of democratic [revolutionary] socialism—hence, the so-called *vía chilena*?) And the conclusion, which briefly sums up events since 1973, seems to stray into unwarranted optimism (which contrasts with the clear-eyed narrative that precedes it). "Allende's legacy is gathering interest," we are told; in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Brazil the Left is on the march; thus, "processes with goals and methods remarkably similar to Allende's are in development in much of Latin America" (146). Perhaps the lumbering style of the sentence conceals some authorial self-doubt; after all, today's Latin American Left is hardly cast in the mold of Allende and Popular Unity; furthermore, in recent years, the Left has been in retreat. And in Chile, a Chile radically and irreversibly changed from that which Allende knew, the Right has just recovered the presidency, in the shape of the banker and television magnate Sebastián Piñera.

Nick Henck has written a detailed and scholarly biography of Subcomandante Marcos—the "Subcommander" as he is called throughout (surely a translation too far, which conjures up images of a deranged Gene Hackman in *Crimson Tide*). As the subtitle of the less-than-snappy title suggests, the approach is "politico-philosophical," flagged by the weirdly surrealistic cover that shows Marcos, in familiar ski mask, puffing his pipe, the smoke curling upward, from which emerge the ethereally disembodied heads of Foucault, Poulantzas, and Althusser. Of course, Marcos and the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) of which he formed part (we might reasonably call him "leader," though that might contravene Zapatista claims to participatory popular democracy) have been the subject of ample study—and a great deal more ill-informed hype—following the famous uprising of January 1994. But, as the Zapatista movement subsided, interest has waned; and, with the passage of time, Marcos can now be analyzed with rather greater detachment. And Henck, author of a previous book about Marcos and the EZLN, has certainly done his homework, trawling through an ocean of primary and secondary sources. (The bibliography is impressive; in contrast, the index, the author admits, is "somewhat skeletal" [303], which is to say skimpy and inadequate.)

Henck seeks to show that Marxism-Leninism—the focus of Marcos's undergraduate thesis, which receives lavish treatment (chapter 3)—remained Marcos's ideological anchor and was not abandoned following a "dazzling Damascene conversion" to an indigenous worldview, as scholars such as Yves Le Bot and Enrique Dussel have argued (14, 24, 98). So, while Marcos espoused indigenous notions and nostrums (including homespun aphorisms like *mandar obedeciendo* "to command obeying" and *preguntando caminamos* "asking we walk"; 17), he retained, Henck argues, a solid substratum of Marxism-Leninism, particularly that of French structuralism (hence the disembodied heads on the cover). And that substratum was crucial to Marcos's political career: ideology determined practice. That, at least, is the book's basic thesis, doggedly sustained, even when the evidence is thin or, indeed, contrary.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Henck's approach is relentlessly ideological, involving endless intellectual genealogies and influences, and the methodology, though certainly scholarly, is tediously scholastic, as quotes are piled on quotes (some from Marcos himself, many from assorted luminaries of the Left, in particular the European Left). The supposed end product of all this—the political action in Chiapas that made Marcos famous—is barely mentioned. In other words, the book is all about intellectuals in their studies, not indigenous rebels in the Selva Lacandona.

We therefore learn a lot about what the young Marcos read but very little about his family and social background (27–29). Marcos's membership in the FLN (Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional) warrants a slew of quotes by, or about, the FLN, its ideology and "influences," but we are told next to nothing about what the FLN actually did, where they did it, or what impact they had (47–55). More seriously, the analysis of the EZLN follows the same scissors-and-paste approach, the bits pasted together being yet more attributions of sources and influences. There is no discussion of the socioeconomic trajectory of Chiapas, its colonial past, or the ruthless infra-politics of the PRI in southern Mexico. Rather, abstract quotes (no people, places, or events) are rolled out in a torrent of scholastic citations, some pages being little more than a collage of quotes strung together by brief authorial links. At times—for example, when the author, dissenting from Pedro Pitarch, relentlessly pursues Marcos's engagement with "The Solipsism of Mach and Avenarius" (65–66)—readers' eyes may start to roll; or, when he pursues purported intellectual influences down the convoluted rabbit hole of French structuralism (chapter 3), they may wearily close. What has any of this to do with the Lacandon forest, logging and oil, PRIísta *caciquismo*, ladino racism, and NAFTA?

The scissors-and-paste approach to quotations means that Henck loses track and, several times, repeats them verbatim (I counted at least eleven such repetitions); and, as already suggested, translations tend to be clunking (thus the well-known publishing house Fondo de Cultura Económica becomes "the economic culture fund" [259]). More important, Henck seems to believe that, like a medieval schoolman, he can substantiate arguments by repetitiously citing weighty authorities rather than by assembling relevant facts—facts, for example, regarding Marcos and the EZLN's practice—within a coherent analysis of "what happened to happen." He bangs on about the Zapatista commitment to democracy—an important aspect of the movement's alleged novelty—but does so solely by reference to secondary sources (132–138), not to EZLN practice in Chiapas. Potentially important events, like the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968 or the Sandinista Revolution of 1979, are scarcely mentioned (52, 134).

Some of the learned exegesis of Marcos's intellectual formation is of interest. Henck cites an array of literary sources and, perhaps, influences, as diverse as Dante, Defoe, Cervantes, Brecht, Neruda, Rulfo, Conan Doyle, C. S. Lewis, and Ray Bradbury (34–35). In fact, the source references in Marcos's communiqués are "overwhelmingly literary," while political theory, including Marxist-Leninist theory, is absent; the significant absences include Mao, Trotsky, Gramsci, Laclau, and—rather unfortunately, given the trio on the cover—Althusser (34). The "best book of political theory," Marcos himself asserts, is *Don Quixote* (35). His personal library contained, along with works by Che Guevara, Elena Poniatowska, and the Mexican cartoonist "Magú," the I Ching and Le Carré's *Smiley's People* (36–37). The problem with lists of this kind—especially when they are long, detailed, and diverse—is that nailing down "influence" (always a vague historical concept) becomes arbitrary and often, it seems, a matter of authorial intuition (Henck detects "a Poulantzian 'feel'" here, "an approach akin to that of Althusser's" there; 77, 86). Even when Marcos fails to cite one of Poulantzas's seminal works, Henck speculates that he probably knew about it (130, 139), and he clutches at other Poulantzian straws (for example, the use—hardly revelatory—of the phrase "fraction of a class" in "The Second Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle" [131]).

Henck adopts a relentlessly formalistic and intellectualized approach (a narrow *Ideengeschichte*, to use the professional jargon). Foucault floats on the cover because he influenced Marcos's undergraduate thesis (he is "quoted seven times in four chapters," no less [77]). Althusser—whose followers happily declared history to be an irrelevant waste of time[1]—is bizarrely credited with prompting Marcos's rejection of the great man theory of history (as exemplified by Mexican school textbooks [86]), a theory that most historians had repudiated long before Althusser hove into sight. (Henck arrives at this weird conclusion by citing Althusser's rejection of "humanism" and quite wrongly equating "humanism" with the great man theory.) Althusser, we are told, also gave Marcos "a keen appreciation of the importance of ideology" (99), thus the need to unmask PRI-ísta state discourse. Even if, as Henck asserts, Marcos "shunned Gramsci like a precipice" (Gramsci being that despicable creature, a "humanist" [104, 229–241]), the Subcomandante's robust critique of PRIísta state discourse—regarding mestizaje, "modernity," and the revolution—could have derived from

[1] E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 194.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

simple observation of the daily modus operandi of the PRI and the yawning gulf between official discourse and actual practice. (To which, I suggest, Jorge Ibargüengoitia—whom it's supposed Marcos must have read [42]—would have been a much more readable, relevant, and perceptive guide than the deranged French uxoricide.) After all, that critique had become a commonplace on the Mexican Left after 1968 (in some cases, before). When Marcos addresses that gulf—noting, for example, that "the more festive the official discourse, the more violent the reality" (262)—he is not a lone Althusserian voice crying in the wilderness but part of a mass Mexican choir.

So, did Althusser or Foucault mandate Marcos's revolutionary odyssey in Chiapas? A brief personal aside: I taught at the University of Essex (UK) in the 1970s, when Foucault, Althusser, and Poulantzas were all the rage, at least on the local Left (which included Ernesto Laclau and several other academics cited in this book). Most of the students who soaked up French structuralism went on to become teachers, lawyers, NGO activists, and the like. None, to my knowledge, went on to lead guerrilla movements. Nor, despite Henck's protestations of Foucault's militant engagement (197–198), were these French luminaries notable for their dedicated activism. As Edward Thompson—who *was* an activist—pointed out in his devastating critique of Althusserianism, the latter was "exactly tailored" to suit those who liked "to perform imaginary psychodramas [in which each outbids the other in adopting ferocious verbal postures] while in fact falling back upon a very old tradition of bourgeois elitism," something of which Marcos could certainly not be accused.[2] Indeed, Marcos derided "theory wholly removed from reality" and stressed that "answers to questions about Zapatismo are [to be found?] not in our theoretical reflections … but in our practice" (106, 108). And to grasp what neoliberalism is all about, he observed, "you don't have to go to Italy" (262). All of which might lead to the awkward conclusion that Marcos perhaps became an effective radical activist despite, not because of, Althusser et al. As Félix Hoyo—one of several commentators who questions Marcos's Althusserian motivation—correctly observes, in Mexico, too, the gung ho Althusserians of the 1970s often finished up as "functionaries or advisers of the Mexican government" (95, 97). And we might recall that Carlos Salinas, prime architect of Mexico's neoliberal turn, had, in the 1970s, flirted with Maoism. Undergraduate intellectual leanings, in other words, are poor predictors of later political trajectories; to assume that they are is, perhaps, a typical failing of self-absorbed university professors. In short, while one cannot fault Henck's industry and effort, one also cannot avoid the conclusion that they are sadly misdirected. So, while the book may interest and enlighten political philosophers, it has little to offer those interested in contemporary Mexican history.

It is something of a relief to swap the dark depths of French structuralism for a piece of lucid and informative history, namely John Lear's *Picturing the Proletariat: Artists and Labor in Revolutionary Mexico, 1908–1940*. *Picturing the Proletariat*—for once, the alliterative title is a true description of the book's content—is a fine, original, well-crafted study of the Mexican art and artists during the radical decades of the Mexican Revolution. An established historian of the Mexican Left and, in particular, the Mexico City working class, Lear successfully straddles two historical genres—art history and labor/Left history—that are often studied in isolation; or, when briefly brought together, may involve historians of art who don't really grasp the sociopolitical milieu in which art was produced, or sociopolitical historians who devote a few inexpert paragraphs to art and artists (usually, in this context, the "big three" muralists, Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros). Lear deftly blends the two genres, which is particularly welcome, given that the Mexican art of this period was highly political, socially engaged, and polemical. The big three get ample attention, but within a much wider and more diverse context (so this is decidedly not a "great man" approach to artistic production); and, without sacrificing balance for fashion, Lear addresses the women of the story, both the artists and the images. Though the revolution—first armed (1910–1920), then institutional (1920–1940)—is the main focus, the opening mise-en-scène addresses the late Porfiriato and influential artists like Saturnino Herrán and José Guadalupe Posada, a key figure whose down-to-earth woodcuts depicting street life and social tensions prefigured revolutionary motifs in terms of both style and content. The book then follows a chronological-cum-analytical format, including a valuable study of *El Machete*—the influential review of Mexico's infant Communist Party (Lear echoes Barry Carr in stressing the party's disproportionate cultural impact). Lear discusses the radicalization of both themes and styles as the Callista 1920s (when the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana dominated labor politics) gave way to the Cardenista 1930s (when the Confederación de Trabajadores de México held sway); and offers an original case study of the small but powerful Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas and, in particular, its engagement with the Spanish Civil War. The author's command of Mexican history is impeccable; I could detect only one minor factual error (Obregón became president in 1920, not 1921 [70]). More important, he depicts the broad outlines

[2] Thompson, The Poverty of Theory, 195.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of revolutionary history in clear, convincing, and balanced brushstrokes. To the credit of University of Texas Press the book includes 12 color plates and 132 black-and-white illustrations (of murals, woodcuts, prints, posters, and a few canvases), the analysis of which is, again, perceptive and accessible. In short, the book valuably complements and amplifies existing studies of Mexican labor/leftism and, apart from informing experts, should be a very suitable text for courses on Mexican/labor/revolutionary history.

Dirk Kruijt's *Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America* combines three distinct approaches that are not very tightly integrated: a sweeping and fairly superficial history of Cuba up to the revolution; a more detailed résumé of Cuba's efforts to export revolution, chiefly in Latin America (Africa gets much less attention); and a kind of prosopographical collage of the Cuban Revolution based on extensive interview transcripts that Kruijt has assiduously collected over the past decade. The interviews are both interesting and original and tell us a good deal about the now elderly, if not deceased cadres who joined the revolution back in the heady days of the late 1950s and 1960s and subsequently formed the backbone of the revolutionary state. They also shed light on the making and execution of Cuban foreign policy in more recent years, adding a human flavor to the swirling acronym soup (thus, in the space of just three pages [85–87] we get DIER, MINTER, M-OE, DGI, MININT, DGLN, DSE, VMT, CIA, ICAP, MINREX, and PAIGCV).

However, if the interviews are the meat in the sandwich, they are preceded by a historical preamble which, to pursue the metaphor, is a pretty stale crust. No doubt some sort of introduction was needed to set the scene and inform readers unfamiliar with Cuban history, but what we get is partial, at times wrong or questionable, and—like the book as a whole—very poorly written. We're told that "a process of land … concentration took place in the mid-1880s": this presumably means the "mid-1800s" or, more correctly, the "mid-nineteenth century" (16). Kruijt misleadingly states that Spain "ceded" Cuba and the Philippines to the United States in 1898 and that Cuba remained "a US protectorate … until 1959" (19, 21). (Jorge Domínguez's differentiation of American imperialism, pre-1934, and "hegemony," 1934–1959, would clarify this confusion.)[3] The somewhat technical terms *sierra* and *llano* are introduced on page 32, but the explanation doesn't appear until page 37. Stylistically, the book is painful reading: prepositions are repeatedly garbled (e.g., the US navy "routed the Spanish fleet into [*sic*] the Bay of Santiago de Cuba"); metaphors are mixed (the "roots and triggers" of revolt, a "cascade of political earthquakes"); names are misspelt (Rosas Pinilla for Rojas Pinilla, São Paolo for São Paulo); and translations are haywire (the revolution is fought by "guerrilla pelotons"—presumably platoons, not cyclists; political leaders who are "assisting" are not, in fact, helping, just showing up; and Che, eagerly setting off on his disastrous Bolivian expedition, was "much urged by his increasing age") (19, 44, 172, 108, 114, 32, 40, 118). And if Fidel Castro declared "La Historia Me Absolvará," he got his Spanish wrong (29). This litany of errors, which seriously impairs the book's readability and at times its clarity, should not be wholly laid at the author's door; rather, the publishers, Zed Books, seem to have given up on the basic task of competent editing.

When it comes to the revolution itself and the relevant oral interviews the book shifts up a gear, offering interesting accounts of the armed struggle against Batista and the evolution of Cuban policy after 1959, especially relations with the USSR (much less so relations with the United States: the Missile Crisis is skimped) and, above all, the attempted export of revolution to Latin America. However, Kruijt seems remarkably ready to take what he's told at face value. His interlocutors are, in almost all cases, veterans of the revolution who have stuck with the regime for decades, through thick and thin; the voices of dissent, recently analyzed by Lillian Guerra, are rarely heard.[4] Not surprisingly, the interviewees' evaluations of Castro and the revolution are positive, even lyrical. A few negative opinions intrude: comments on Che Guevara's dogmatism or wistful recollections of a popular revolution consigned to history (70–71). But these are rare, and the author makes little attempt either to interrogate his interlocutors or to insert caveats in the text. What you hear is what you get, it seems, and what you get is an upbeat story of revolutionary heroism and advance. Of course, this story is not wholly mythical (there are objective indicators of advance in terms of health and literacy, which could be given in evidence, but Kruijt eschews aggregate data in favor of individual accounts). Equally, there is an interesting analysis to be made concerning the manufacture, makeup, and dissemination of the Cuban revolutionary myth, of the kind that has been attempted in the Mexican context. Indeed, the stirring reminiscences of these Cuban veterans remind me, as a Mexicanist, of the oral accounts of the onward and upward march of the Mexican Revolution that both PRIísta bigwigs and more anonymous teachers and popular activists gave to the oral history pioneers of the 1960s and after. It is not that these accounts are entirely false or mendacious; but they are partial, embellished, and to some degree reified—in Mexican

[3] Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[4] Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption and Resistance, 1959–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

parlance, they are *rollos*, formulaic and often well-rehearsed "reels," or, in James Scott's words, "public transcripts."[5] As such, they need to be "deconstructed"—taken apart and explained—not presented to the reader as raw sources.

The final section of the book is devoted largely to Cuban foreign policy; post-1959 domestic processes, notably the "special period," are dealt with perfunctorily. Cuban efforts to promote revolution (chiefly in Latin America and the Anglophone Caribbean) receive encyclopedic treatment, by which I mean that it reads like a series of encyclopedia entries, organized by periods and countries. Thus, chapter 5, entitled rather vaguely "The Mature Years (Early 1970s–Late 1980s)," zooms around the region—three pages on Peru, two on Panama, three on Chile—offering a series of densely packed narratives interspersed with some interesting comments by Cuban insiders (whom we are again expected to take on trust). These narratives offer useful synopses of Cuban policy, but, again, analysis is lacking and the reader does not come away with a clear grasp of how Cuban policy added up. After all, efforts to export revolution to Latin America were, with the exception of Nicaragua, a failure, often a disastrous failure; and, in the medium term, even Nicaragua proved a sad disappointment for those who hoped for a progressive socialist outcome. Outcomes aside, Castro was also apparently happy to rub along with the likes of Manuel Noriega and the Argentine military junta. The reader is tempted to conclude that Kruijt's quite legitimate sympathy for the Cuban cause, evident in his occasional lapse into lyricism (the provision of medical services to Latin American insurgents was "the most laudable, selfless and generous" example of Cuban policy [171]) makes it difficult for him to view the palpable failings of the regime, both at home and abroad, with detached clarity.

The two most ambitious books on the list, by Becker and Pipitone, offer sweeping surveys of Latin American revolutions and the Latin American Left, respectively. That said, they are very different. Becker's *Twentieth-Century Latin American Revolutions* is a textbook; one giveaway is the insertion of mini-biographies and sample "original documents" that presumably are meant to pique the interest of somnolent students; the documents, necessarily a tiny tip of a massive archival iceberg, don't strike me as very exciting and their insertion tends to break up the narrative flow. Given the difficulty of tackling such a big and complex subject (revolutions) in a clear and accessible way, Becker's study has many merits; but it is unlikely to enthuse scholars who are knowledgeable about the region and its revolutions. As an overview of the major cases—Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—the book is balanced and reliable, based on a wide range of sources, and will certainly serve as a sound introduction for students. Inevitably, however, in a book of this scope, some queries arise: while the treatment of Guatemala, Bolivia, and Nicaragua strikes me as eminently sound, some of the Mexican analysis is questionable: it may be impossible to offer reliable calibration, but I doubt that the revolution "for the first time created a truly national sense of Mexican identity" (36, 47) (there is the small matter of the French Intervention of the 1860s to consider); Madero did not, I think, oppose Díaz "in order to prevent a radical revolution" (39); nor did Villa propose "much more radical social policies" than his Carrancista adversaries (47). And—a clear-cut empirical error—the Constitutional Congress of 1916–1917 did not elect Carranza president (48). On Cuba, too, the key decade of the 1930s is dealt with in one brief sentence, and the 1933 revolution, which cast a long shadow, is not mentioned at all (109). Regarding the Castro regime, the break with the United States is covered rather perfunctorily, and Cuba's role in Africa gets short shrift (120–121) (though I accept it's very easy for reviewers, spared the strictures of publishers regarding word limits, to point to putative omissions). On the other hand, Becker displays a shrewd grasp of the broader phenomenon of the "Latin American revolutionary tradition." Like Pipitone, he pays due attention to anarchism (19–22); he notes that—contrary to some simple notions—internal factors were usually much more important than external (e.g., Soviet) models or incitements (49); and he correctly explains how and why US policy toward the Guatemalan and Bolivian Revolutions was strikingly different (100–101).

Although the bulk of the book consists of revolutionary narratives, Becker is alive to scholarly debates, for example, regarding when the Mexican Revolution ended (51); and he offers a useful overview of contrasting theories of revolution (chapter 1). However, he discreetly avoids any authorial arbitration of different views, still less any bold conclusions of his own: he sticks to straightforward—generally sound—narratives and the (rather briefer) analytical sections steer a neutral course ("on the one hand … and on the other"). Perhaps this judicious middle-of-the-roadism (which, I shall note, contrasts with Pipitone's boldly forthright pronouncements) is advisable, if not inevitable, in a textbook of this kind. (I once took part in a "scholarly evaluation" of school history textbooks for the state of Texas: it was clear that the chief aim of the authors was to avoid giving offence at all costs.) Perhaps the idea is to let the students make up their own minds. But

[5] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

middle-of-the-roadism has its downside too; as a Texan leftist (they do exist) once remarked, "there's nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos."

If Becker is judicious to a fault, Ugo Pipitone weighs in with much more forthright evaluations of the Latin American Left. *La esperanza y el delirio* is a hefty tome (551 pages), offering an impressive *tour d'horizon* of the Left, from its nineteenth-century origins, through twentieth-century mutations (anarchism, Marxism, populism) to the present day, when the so-called pink tide has receded, and the Center or Center-Right holds sway in most countries (the PRI in Mexico, at least till late 2018; Santos in Colombia, Macri in Argentina, and Piñera in Chile). Pipitone's approach is distinctive and discursive; his opinions, outspoken and undisguised, come through clearly. He has a soft spot for the anarchists and gives them ample and deserved coverage (we may contrast those histories, whether of the Left or of Latin America in general, for whom anarchism is a brief and exotic deviation, a ranting John the Baptist to the cool Marxist-Leninist Messiah waiting in the wings). He intensely dislikes populism, while recognizing its undoubted appeal; and he is trenchantly critical of the Comintern and the Cuban Communist regime. (It would be interesting to get Pipitone and Kruijt in the same room on this topic; although, since Pipitone bizarrely considers the late Hugh Thomas to be "the greatest historian of Castro's Cuba," even quoting, approvingly, Thomas's ludicrous description of the Castro regime as "the first fascist regime of the Left" [314, 319], he might not come off best in that particular encounter.)

Pipitone's authorial style is learned and allusive. While some may find this hard going, I see it is a refreshing change from the dull and dessicated technical jargon that is de rigueur in much of today's political science. Orotund phrases jostle with French, Italian, and Latin tags (and I don't mean the overused "etceteras" that clutter the text); we encounter, among many others, Dr. Johnson, Gibbon, Pascal, Dickens, Tolstoy, Sartre, and even "Le Douanier" Rousseau. Occasionally, Pipitone goes over the top—for example, lifting a paragraph from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to spin out a convoluted metaphor (293); occasionally, even his Latin lets him down ("la sancta sanctorum" [115] should surely be "el sanctum sanctorum"). But, on balance, the reader is taken on a diverting ride, up and down the bumpy landscape of the Left, without developing the saddle sores that some wearisome texts tend to produce.

The section on anarchism is particularly insightful and useful; my sense is, however, that Pipitone is overly committed to a "diffusionist" and Eurocentric explanation, that is, that anarchism was a European export, disproportionately the work of European—chiefly Italian and Spanish—migrants. While this works pretty well for Argentina, it cannot explain Mexico, where Spanish immigrants were few (and they tended to be the hated gachupin merchants and foremen rather than radical tribunes of the people), while the early anarchists were overwhelmingly Mexican. When it comes to the Communist Left, Pipitone's coverage is perhaps more familiar, but the critique is forthright and, in some measure, original (since it stems, not from some one-eyed Cold Warrior, but from a critic whose own stance is avowedly social democratic [488]). While Pipitone is surely right to lambaste the USSR and the Comintern for their cynical opportunism, their insouciant inconsistency, and their blatant instrumentalism, this (familiar) critique again carries a whiff of Eurocentrism. As Pipitone notes, Communist parties around the world were diverse and, to a degree, nationally specific. They often danced to Moscow's tune but in different circumstances, and their role—along with their appeal—depended on those circumstances. In Europe, the defeat of fascism was the work of Communist resistance movements (in Greece, Yugoslavia, and France) as well as the Allies and the Red Army. In Latin America, Communist parties mobilized workers and peasants and helped achieve progressive reforms, particularly in the 1930s, in Mexico and Cuba. In Mexico, as Lear shows, the Communist Party had a cultural impact out of proportion to its numbers; and the appeal of the Communists—for example, in the Electricians Union—depended on their deserved reputation for "militancy and honesty," a rare combination in the Mexican labor movement (Lear, 221). Again, during the Cold War period, Communists supported—but, contra the CIA, did not direct—Guatemala's decade of democratic social reform (1944–1954); and they bolstered independent *sindicatos* in Mexico (e.g., the railroad union). The dead hand of Soviet policy certainly prejudiced the appeal of Communism in Latin America, as Pipitone stresses, but it could not entirely stifle that appeal, nor could it prevent the Communists from contributing to genuinely progressive—and, in Cuba, revolutionary—change.

When it comes to the "cyclical illusion" of populism (chapter 3), Pipitone is again sternly critical but somewhat more confusing. (But then populism—a "contested concept" if ever there was one, and the subject of extensive but inconclusive recent discussion—easily generates confusion, even in the most lucid Cartesian intellect.) Pipitone dissents from Kurt Weyland's political/ideational definition (192) but seems to veer pretty close to it himself (perhaps because it makes a good deal of sense); but he incorporates—rather riskily—Gino Germani's old and contentious thesis regarding the "irruption of the masses" into "modern" politics (242). And, on similar lines, he is rather too fond of those old—and also contentious—historico-cultural explanations

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that stress Latin America's benighted attachment to caudillismo and messianism. (It is, perhaps, his visceral dislike of caudillismo that leads Pipitone almost completely to ignore radical—ergo, leftist?—military regimes, whether in 1930s Bolivia or Peru after 1968.) On the other hand, he offers a powerful denunciation of guerrilla adventurism—which reached its awful apogee with Sendero Luminoso—as well as a judicious critique of currently fashionable "indigenous utopianism" and its glib multiculturalist fellow travelers (435–437).

Unlike some supposed "surveys" of Latin America that are highly selective in their geographical coverage of this large and diverse region, Pipitone's purview is commendably wide. He is also broad-minded and up-to-date in his use of sources (although his bibliography, broken down by countries, themes, and individuals, is a pain to navigate). But, as with all such surveys, the determined critic can detect biases and omissions: in this case, three in particular. First, while some statistical data are scattered throughout the text, they are neither uniform nor adequate. After all, the long-term rhythms of the Left—the rise and fall of popular movements and their related projects or ideologies—are bound up with the region's economic trajectory, including both structural changes (roughly, from *desarrollo hacia afuera* through ISI to the neoliberal *apertura* of the last thirty years) and also severe conjunctural shocks, such as the Great Depression, the two world wars, and the debt crisis and inflationary spiral of the 1980s. Pipitone, of course, mentions these, but the narrative suggests an excessively autonomous politics driven by ideology and international relations—for example, the rise and fall of the USSR—rather than by what David Hackett Fischer called the "great waves" of economic history, which underlie the political spume and spray.[6]

If this is the sort of critique an economic historian—an economic reductionist, perhaps—might make, there is also a potential critique from the standpoint of social history. Pipitone's approach is largely political and focuses on leaders, formal organizations, and administrations. One reason why the substantial section on anarchism reads well is that it sometimes gets down to the grass roots, describing the "lives of labor" in the poor barrios of Latin America's burgeoning fin-de-siècle cities. Of course, a sweeping survey of Latin America as a whole cannot swoop down to the local and particular, save in a few particular instances; but Pipitone tends to remain in the upper atmosphere. Thus, grassroots support for Peronism is asserted, but there is no attempt to capture the cultural perceptions and motivations of the *descamisados* or, for example, of the Peronista stronghold of Berisso. (Daniel James's pioneering works are not cited, and the Cordobazo—the 1969 labor insurgency, the subject of a landmark study by James Brennan—merits just one brief sentence).[7] Similarly, the "new social movements" of the 1980s and after get short shrift. Given that the main thrust of Latin American historiography in the last forty or so years has been toward "history from below," both social and cultural, it is regrettable that Pipitone opted for a resolutely top-down approach.

Finally, and reverting to what, in this context, may seem like ancient history, Pipitone has little to say about Latin American liberalism. Recently, there has been a welcome renewal of interest in the topic (possibly prompted by the region's "Third Wave" of democratization). Historians have stressed the importance, the popular underpinnings and—particularly in Mexico and Nicaragua—the patriotic content of liberalism, which made it a powerful force, originally flowering in the nineteenth century but still centrally important in the twentieth. It may reasonably be objected that twentieth-century liberalism is not a project or ideology of the Left; by then, it had been outflanked by varieties of socialism and, indeed, in its recent economic, "neoliberal" guise, it is conventionally located on the Right. However, there is abundant evidence that, as a mobilizing ideology, liberalism could still fuel popular, progressive, and reformist politics. The initial Mexican Revolution was powered ideologically by liberalism; the radical Partido Liberal Mexicano, though it veered toward anarcho-syndicalism, started out liberal (the clue is in the name), and some of its protagonists retained their liberal commitment. (As Pipitone correctly notes [26], the ideological frontier between radical liberalism and anarchism was, in Latin America as in Spain, highly permeable.) Successful Mexican revolutionaries like Alvaro Obregón proclaimed their attachment to the good old Liberal cause. Sandino, as Bendaña makes abundantly clear, embraced an eclectic ideology, blending radical liberalism, nationalism, and social egalitarianism. In Uruguay, in a very different political context, Batlle's Partido Colorado blended liberalism with an incipient social democracy (Batlle gets a brief and belated mention [467], but would merit fuller treatment); while in Colombia the outspoken tribune of the people Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was a member

[6] David Hackett Fischer, *The Great Wave: Price Revolutions and the Rhythms of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[7] Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2000); James P. Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Córdoba, 1955–1976: Ideology, Work, and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the historic Liberal Party (379). Even in revolutionary Cuba, progressive liberals played an important role in the early years, until, as Pipitone laments, "authoritarian caudillismo" led by a "Caribbean Napoleon" shouldered them aside (321, 323). In other words, any analysis of the Latin American Left has to pay serious attention to liberalism—not just the cerebral lucubrations of Locke or Mill, but liberalism as the vehicle of popular mobilization, political contestation, and progressive reform.

The sheer diversity of these seven books makes it difficult to tease out common threads, let alone shared conclusions. Most of these authors stick to their particular furrows and don't look to the broader landscape beyond (nor should they, necessarily). And the broader landscape potentially encompasses a huge range of relevant questions concerning the Left and revolutions in Latin America. A question of immediate consequence—which any self-respecting historian will shy away from—is "Whither goes the Latin American Left?" Is the recent "pink tide" ebbing? Indeed, is the conventional Left-Right distinction, dating back to the French Revolution, melting away in a mélange of proliferating political parties, each self-interestedly seeking media coverage, state subsidies, and cushy prebends? (Perhaps I am influenced overmuch by the recent [2018] Mexican electoral scene.) And such questions, of course, demand a prior consideration of how the Left should be defined—and, inevitably, subdivided and typologized.

While Becker (5–7) offers a reasonable résumé of how "revolution" might be conceptualized, none of these authors explicitly defines "the Left." Pipitone, writing "a history of the Left in Latin America," provides an implicit typology of the "many lefts" (13), including populist, utopian, revolutionary, and social democratic, making no secret of his support for the latter. In this respect he echoes Jorge Castañeda's well-known dichotomization of the Latin American Left into a (good) social-democratic current, exemplified by Lula and Bachelet, and a (bad) populist variety, including Chávez and the Kirchners.[8] Figueroa Clark (146), in contrast, homogenizes the Left, questionably lumping together Allende—a democratic Marxist wedded to the rule of law—and Castañeda's demagogic populists.

A central problem, when it comes to defining the Left, concerns context (as regards both time and place): for example, is the Cuban Left represented by the rump Castrista state (as Kruijt would presumably believe) or by dissidents who advocate democracy and human rights? Likewise the rump Chavista state and the Venezuelan opposition? Clearly, advocacy of change, including radical change, is not ipso facto a criterion of the Left (or it would admit, for example, O'Donnell's "bureaucratic authoritarians").[9] Furthermore, when typologies of leftism are being considered, it may be necessary to use several axes: political (democratic/authoritarian), economic (state versus market), even cultural (for example, Ostiguy's "raw" and "cooked").[10] Historically, and commonsensically, the Left involves hostility to the market and a fondness for statist economic policies, whether populist or Marxist-Leninist. But some recent research would question this old assumption, pointing—at least in certain circumstances—to the recent convergence of popular social movements and market solutions.[11]

Perhaps, instead of simply assuming what the Left is, we should rather establish broad criteria, applicable across time and space, premised on the notion that leftist policies, parties, or governments are those that advocate—and, more importantly, deliver—more democratic access to resources (these broadly defined to include income, education, social provision, human rights, security, and political power). A maximalist or utopian program might (unconvincingly) promise simultaneous satisfaction of all these needs; in reality, it implies a great many tricky trade-offs—between, for example, security and human rights, poverty elimination and egalitarianism, or investment and redistribution.

In this light, Pipitone's critique of revolution and "utopianism" would seem to reflect a rough academic —and, perhaps, popular—consensus. As James E. Mahon recently observed, today's Latin American Left has opted for "humble meliorism," piecemeal reform of the kind that has recently achieved a modest degree of poverty alleviation and has turned its back on "utopias and formulas" (so, none too soon, adios Althusser!).[12] But Pipitone's bête noire, populism, still haunts the land; and while populism may espouse "meliorism" (with some success, as "classic" populists like Cárdenas and Perón showed), it is rarely humble. Mexico's new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, led a motley electoral coalition hubristically entitled "Juntos

[8] Jorge G. Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs*, no. 85 (May/June 2006): 28–43.

[9] Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina, 1966–1973, in Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[10] Pierre Ostiguy, "Argentina's Double Political Spectrum: Party System, Political Identities and Ideologies, 1944–2007," Kellogg Institute Working Paper no. 361 (October 2009).

[11] Jeffery W. Rubin and Vivienne Bennett, eds., *Enduring Reform: Progressive Activism and Private Sector Responses in Latin American Democracies* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015).

[12] James E. Mahon Jr., "Progressive Reforms and the Art of the Possible," *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 1 (2018): 193–201.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Haremos Historia" (Together we will make history). But the history of the Latin American Left, as these books discuss, gives cause for caution. After all, leftist, especially radical leftist, governments have only rarely won power, even more rarely retained power, and more rarely still used that power to implement durable and genuinely leftist policies that provide broad, "democratic" access to resources. And this, in turn, may help explain why the region's "durable inequality" stubbornly persists.[13]

Author Information

Alan Knight is Emeritus Professor of the History of Latin America at Oxford University. He is the author of *The Mexican Revolution* (1986) and numerous books and articles dealing with the modern history of Latin America, especially Mexico.

[13] Though it does not focus on Latin America, Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), is highly pertinent.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press

How to cite this article: Knight, Alan. 2019. Revolution and the Left in Latin America. *Latin American Research Review* 54(3), pp. 772–783. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879

Submitted: 13 March 2018 **Accepted:** 12 April 2018 **Published:** 17 September 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

LARR *Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.879 Published online by Cambridge University Press