

BOOK REVIEW

Leigh A. Payne, Julia Zulver, and Simón Escoffier, eds. *The Right Against Rights in Latin America*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2023. 306 pp.; hardcover (US\$ 90.00)
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Payne, Zulver, and Escoffier's edited volume *The Right Against Rights in Latin America* is an important and long-awaited contribution to the literature on the contemporary right wing, not only in Latin America, but globally. The contributors of this volume propose and advance analytical concepts and categories. They also contribute descriptively to the systematization of relevant information on political processes in several countries in the region where these groups that some call "new right" have been involved. It is a must-read book both for those who want to delve into understanding what these new political expressions are and how they develop, and for those who want to learn more about politics in general in cases such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Honduras, or Uruguay.

The book's contributions are intellectually provocative. Not only because of the way in which the book feeds us with rich descriptions of the cases, but also its conceptual proposal and its theoretical implications. The central argument is that what the authors call "the right against rights" (RAR) is not just a subtype of right-wing groups, but fundamentally a "new" social phenomenon (not necessarily new in its emergence, but in its systematic study), different from other instances such as political parties, interest groups, and other forms of right-wing political action such as technocratic-business alliances or grassroots groups. The concept of the RAR is as scholarly provocative as politically useful, introducing a normative dimension to the study of the right.

This is an important research and public scholarship agenda, yet the volume's conceptual proposal generates two fundamental questions that should be carefully addressed: 1) What is the relation of the concept with previous definitions? 2) What type of phenomenon is being conceptualized?

First, while useful, the concept of RAR has its pitfalls. It generates problems of domain, resonance, and differentiation (Gerring 2011). On the one hand, the scope of the concept is counterintuitive. The authors delineate the boundaries of the phenomenon noting that RAR are "groups [that] differ from right-wing parties, interest groups, and lobbies. While they may, and often do, *ally* with such institutionalized entities, they maintain sufficient autonomy to act outside the system" (7, italics mine).

Yet, the use of "the right" and "against rights" as constitutive elements fail to establish clear borders; they instead hint that the concept applies to any manifestation within the group of "the right" that opposes the advancement of rights. Using a rather generic term like RAR is risky not only for the reader but also for researchers using the framework. The concept is easily muddled with a coalition of diverse actors and organizations united with a common objective regardless of their organizational essence. For instance, the empirical chapters include analyses of groups that the conceptual definition warns us are not part of the conceptual set.

Using the proposed concept also creates a problem of resonance. The RAR is consistent with other existing definitions. The editors define it as "collective extra-institutional and institutional mobilization to check, roll back or reverse certain rights promoted by previously marginalized groups and communities [...] and to restore, promote, or advance to status quo ante of traditional political, social, economic, and cultural rights." Such definition could use a label already proposed by the literature developed so far: reactionary grassroots groups, for instance.

The authors differentiate the RAR from the "grassroots right," a label that they consider erroneous because RAR cases also include elitist groups (10, 33–35). However, the grassroots characteristic implies the level of organization of the platform and its sophistication, rather than

its interests or the socioeconomic characteristics of its members (Mayka and Smith 2021). Therefore, the difference is not very clear. In fact, due to its familiarity, the idea of grassroots is closer to the definition proposed by the authors than a definition based solely on the objective they pursue and that can be shared with more than one type of actor.

The concept proposed in the volume creates a third problem, that of differentiation. In the current Latin American context, the definition does not generate a clear contrast that justifies the delimitation of the objective (against rights) to the subject included in the term (the right). The same definition could be applied to conservative and even reactionary left-wing projects, especially since the universe of “rights” used by the authors includes several types: gender identity, reproductive rights, communal rights, indigenous rights, environmental rights, representation rights, socioeconomic rights, and so on. Therefore, not only is it difficult to identify what makes a group to be considered “against rights,” particularly, for example, if the group is in favor of some and against others.

This happens due to the type of definition of right-wing favored by the editors, one that is based in the defense and opposition to rights. The left grants rights and the right opposes them. However, the last 20 years contradict this distinction since we have observed a “left against rights” too. Some leftist groups have limited the expansion of political rights, gender, and reproductive rights, or indigenous rights when those collided with their economic or social projects. The solution could be to say that such groups are not leftists by definition; but then those cases should be analyzed in the empirical chapters and this is not the case.

Second, the book opens an important discussion about the phenomenon that these new rights embody. Despite the definition, the chapters mostly focus on a single type of actor, one that the editors recognize as “extra-institutional right-wing mobilizations” (9). For this reason, there is an urge to distinguish the phenomenon of RAR from social movements, especially from the idea that there is such a thing as right-wing social movements. The authors provide two reasons for this differentiation: one is a constitutive characteristic of social movements and another, rather controversial, is based in the political use of the term “social movement.”


The authors point out that the phenomenon they observe is not consistent with one of the most important attributes of a movement: the permanence over time. On the contrary, they argue, this phenomenon is rather constituted by ephemeral mobilizations. Hence, the editors favor such a term in their proposal. Although they recognize that some RAR groups may have a more permanent vocation or find the resources and opportunities to constitute themselves as a movement, the preference for the idea of mobilizations responds, according to the authors, to the need to include those groups that do not achieve this aim. Instead, we could ask why some of these RAR groups do manage to consolidate while others remain ephemeral expressions.

However, a second characteristic restricts them from fully entering this category. The editors claim that the widely recognized definition of social movements implies a particular orientation: “social movements fundamentally aim to bring about social change, and not to stop change and return to the traditional status quo ante.” Therefore, a phenomenon “against rights” could not fall into this category. Although they recognize the existence of “countermovements” within literature, their normative option prefers to reduce these expressions to mere mobilizations. This is a decision that would merit further discussion, especially because the descriptions of the cases rather indicate the existence of a strong variation in the organizational and tactical characteristics of the groups called RAR, to the point that it seems that some expressions are so different that they are part of very different phenomena beyond their common orientation against the promotion of rights.

While the concept and its delimitation require more debate, the book still contributes to an important causal discussion based on the in-depth description of the analysis cases, accompanied by a comparative reflection by the editors. Payne, Zulver, and Escoffier raise multiple and very suggestive causal questions, both about the origins and consequences of the existence and strength of the RAR in the region. The empirical chapters provide important clues to solve them. The most

risky but important contribution goes against a very repeated hypothesis: these new expressions are caused as a reaction to the pink tide.

Both the narrative of the cases and the analysis of the editors contribute to denying this claim. They show that these movements also develop in countries where the turn to the left was limited or did not occur. On the contrary, they propose a mechanism based on the perception of threat that, although discussed in previous literature, deserves further theorization in the Latin American context. In that sense, the book contributes decisively by bringing us closer to the realities, fears, and motivations behind right-wing groups in an important variety of countries with very diverse political, institutional, and socioeconomic trajectories.

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