

INTRODUCTION

Revolutionary Actors, Encounters, and Transformations

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Long after the end of the Cold War, certain specters still haunt discussions of Latin America's twentieth-century left: the charismatic strongman, the communist ideologue slavishly subservient to the Kremlin, the middle-class youths who, "mesmerized" by the 1959 Cuban Revolution, grabbed guns and took to the hills, oblivious to the wishes of the poor rural populations into which they parachuted. The typical leftist was, for one critic, "elitist, internationalist, arrogant, and unrealistic."¹ Another writer, critiquing the Salvadoran rebels of the 1980s, describes them as middle- and upper-class individuals who were "dogmatic, sectarian," and "narrowly militaristic," and who showed a "disdain for ordinary people." In El Salvador and elsewhere, militant leftist movements gained mass support only through the use of coercion, fear, and appeals to "anti-Americanism" and other "irrational" feelings.² These critiques often echo the discredited *dos demonios* narrative of the Cold War, according to which "left- and right-wing extremists" terrorized Latin American populations.³ Sometimes Washington is still cast

* Thanks to Diana Sierra Becerra and Sinclair Thomson for feedback on this introduction.

¹ Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 16; Michael Radu, "Introduction: Revolution and Revolutionaries," in *Violence and the Latin American Revolutionaries*, ed. Michael Radu (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988), 7 (second quote). *Internationalist* is, of course, intended as a pejorative.

² Yvon Grenier, *The Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador: Ideology and Political Will* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 89, 70, 26; Radu, "Introduction," 8.

³ Jonathan C. Brown, *Cuba's Revolutionary World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 15. See also David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). In every country but Peru right-wing

as an earnest force of restraint that “promoted moderation over rightist and leftist ideology and violence.”⁴

Critiques of the left are not limited to conservative circles. Many progressive observers have stressed the traditional left’s class reductionism, authoritarian decision making, and domination by urban, male, *mestizo* (mixed-race) leaders who failed to understand the complexity of oppression in their countries.⁵ One typical scholar writes that “the various Lefts have been historically and notably silent on questions of ethnicity and race.”⁶ Progressives may celebrate the Zapatista rebels and other “new” left movements that emerged starting in the late twentieth century, but they tend to view older left movements in more negative terms.

These progressive critiques are much more grounded in reality than the conservative ones. Many leftists have indeed been deeply flawed, both personally and politically. Yet the history of the Latin American left is more diverse than these critiques tend to imply. As recent scholarship has begun to highlight, many twentieth-century leftists struggled against class exploitation and imperialism while also confronting racism, patriarchy, and other oppressions, and while seeking to build more democratic organizations and societies. Revolution, for them, meant not just the seizure of state power or a change in property relations, but also a series of other transformations in social life. Many were flexible, self-reflective, and open to critique. And rather than seeking to graft “foreign” ideologies onto their societies, they tried to adapt ideas like Marxism, anarchism, and feminism to their particular national contexts.

These practices and visions did not merely emanate from formal leaders. The contributors to this volume understand the formation of the left

violence (almost always aided by the United States) greatly outweighed violence by the left, and was far more often directed against civilians. For a corrective see Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America’s Long Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴ Russell Crandall, *The Salvador Option: The United States in El Salvador, 1977–1992* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10.

⁵ For instance Charles R. Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas in the Age of Development* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Florencia Mallon, “Beyond Colonialism: Race and Ethnicity in the Mobilization of Indigenous People,” *LASA Forum* 48, no. 2 (2017): 17–19.

⁶ Deborah J. Yashar, “The Left and Citizenship Rights,” in *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left*, ed. Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 192.

as a contested historical process in which rank-and-file actors and external constituencies, not simply top party leaders, played vital roles. Oppressed groups within the left, or whom the left sought to organize, often exercised important influences on left ideology and practice. Leftist women and indigenous people, in particular, helped reshape leftist politics in a number of the cases examined here, but their interventions are often ignored in studies that emphasize the left's sexism and racism. Uncovering the negotiations over power, platforms, and everyday practices on the left is essential to an accurate understanding of past revolutionaries' successes and failures. Those stories, in turn, hold important lessons for peoples struggling for emancipation in the twenty-first century. Learning the lessons of the past requires revisiting the history of the Latin American left with fresh eyes, unencumbered by Cold War categories and other blinders.

DEFINING THE LEFT

In broad terms, the left might be defined to include all those who work for equity in one or more realms of society: the economy, the home, the community, and the polity. It is often defined much more narrowly, to include only those who self-identify as socialist, communist, or anarchist. This restrictive definition fails to include the countless organizations, communities, and individuals who fight for a more egalitarian society but for various reasons do not formally affiliate with the left. It misses, for instance, the radical Zapatista peasant movement in Mexico in the 1910s. It misses the Zapatista-inspired movement led by Rubén Jaramillo a few decades later, which confronted capitalism and autocracy but did not directly identify as socialist.⁷ It misses labor activists around Latin America who were not explicitly anti-capitalist but who struggled against capitalist power in meaningful ways. And it misses many movements of indigenous people, Afro-descendants, women, and other groups, which are often portrayed as strictly "identity" movements despite their incorporation of class demands.⁸ Many such movements have sought revolutionary changes, whether or not they have self-identified as revolutionary

⁷ Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Priísta* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁸ This tendency to separate class from identity is especially common in scholarship on indigenous movements. It is also apparent in much of the broader literature on "new" social movements and in postmodern and subaltern studies scholarship that stresses fragmented experiences rather than class.

and whether they have been armed or unarmed. The point is not to claim all movements of the oppressed for the left. In fact, the self-identified Left (with a capital *L*) has often been behind the curve of popular resistance, as some of this book's chapters emphasize. Rather, this broader definition of the left is a more or less objective one based on egalitarian goals and values.⁹

The tendency to draw a sharp distinction between class and identity is largely a product of Cold War repression and of the neoliberalism imposed by business, governments, and financial institutions since the 1970s. During the Cold War those who threatened capitalist interests were threatened with torture and death (and often still are). Meanwhile, neoliberal policies of austerity, privatization, and deregulation further undercut labor unions and working-class solidarity. By erecting higher barriers to collective material empowerment, right-wing terror and neoliberalism pressured movements to emphasize ethnic, gender, and other non-class identities.¹⁰ By the 1990s many scholars and research funders had gone even further, concluding that class and political economy were passé.

Recent scholarship on the left has begun to challenge the distinction between class and identity, in two major ways. First, it has shown that the categories themselves are closely intertwined. Non-class identities have implications for the class structure, for instance when racism informed the United Fruit Company's hiring practices and shaped workers' interactions with each other.¹¹ Conversely, changes in property relations or economic policy help to reshape other hierarchies, as when the Chilean agrarian reform of the early 1970s unwittingly exacerbated gender conflicts in

⁹ Of course, many movements are progressive in some ways and conservative in others. But in most cases, a movement's core demands place it mostly on either the right or left side of the political spectrum.

¹⁰ See for instance Charles R. Hale, "Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 485–524; Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Lesley Gill, *A Century of Violence in a Red City: Popular Struggle, Counterinsurgency, and Human Rights in Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). For some movements this change of emphasis was mostly a strategic discursive choice made under great duress, while for others it reflected a deeper ideological shift.

¹¹ Phillippe I. Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Banana Plantation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Cindy Forster, *The Time of Freedom: Campesino Workers in Guatemala's October Revolution* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 16, 18.

peasant households.¹² Second, movements themselves have often combined economic and noneconomic demands. Recent scholars have uncovered neglected histories of leftists who attacked multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. Visions of indigenous and black liberation were present in some leftist movements in the Andes, Central America, and the Caribbean long prior to the rise of more visible indigenous and black movements in the late twentieth century. Often these visions were promoted by indigenous and black leftists themselves.¹³ In parallel fashion, leftist women often insisted on merging socialism and anti-imperialism with feminist demands. Whether or not they embraced the feminist label, they practiced a more holistic revolutionary politics than standard narratives imply.¹⁴ Similar stories can be found in other parts of

¹² Heidi Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agrarian Reform, 1950–1973* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹³ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Joanna Crow, “Debates about Ethnicity, Class and Nation in Allende’s Chile (1970–1973),” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26, no. 3 (2007): 319–38; Marc Becker, *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador’s Modern Indigenous Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Iván Molina Jiménez, “Afrocostarricense y comunista: Harold Nichols y su actividad política en Costa Rica,” *Latinoamérica: Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos* 46 (2008): 141–68; Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010); Gerardo Rénique, “‘People’s War,’ ‘Dirty War’: Cold War Legacy and the End of History in Postwar Peru,” in *A Century of Revolution*, ed. Grandin and Joseph, 309–37; Steven J. Hirsch, “Anarchist Visions of Race and Space in Northern Perú, 1898–1922,” in *In Defiance of Boundaries: Anarchism in Latin American History*, ed. Geoffroy de Laforcade and Kirwin Shaffer (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 261–80; Alfonso Salgado, “‘A Small Revolution’: Family, Sex, and the Communist Youth of Chile during the Allende Years (1970–1973),” *Twentieth Century Communism* 8 (2015): 62–88; Anne Garland Mahler, “The Red and the Black in Latin America: Sandalio Junco and the ‘Negro Question’ from an Afro-Latin American Perspective,” *American Communist History* 17, no. 1 (2018): 16–32.

¹⁴ Deborah Levenson-Estrada, “The Loneliness of Working-Class Feminism: Women in the ‘Male World’ of Labor Unions, Guatemala City, 1970s,” in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box*, ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 208–31; Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict*; Rosario Montoya, *Gendered Scenarios of Revolution: Making New Men and New Women in Nicaragua, 1975–2000* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012); Michelle Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in the Cuban Revolution, 1952–1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Diana Carolina Sierra Becerra, “Insurgent Butterflies: Gender and Revolution in El Salvador, 1965–2015” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2017).

the world. In the US context, the contributions of black Southern communists during the Great Depression, radical women of color in the 1970s, and gay and lesbian anti-imperialists in the 1980s are now being rediscovered. Like much new work on Latin America, recent studies of the United States left have highlighted the remarkable radical coalitions that have sometimes emerged across lines of racial, gender, and sexual difference.¹⁵ These studies suggest that the familiar distinction between class and identity movements distorts the ways that many activists understood their own efforts.

Also unwarranted is the firm distinction often made between leftists and nationalists – another binary that was central to Cold War counter-insurgency. Some critics continue to echo Cold War discourse by depicting the historic Latin American left as blind transmitters of foreign ideologies, ignorant of national realities if not traitors to national interests. But recent scholarship has moved beyond national borders to illuminate the genuinely transnational dimensions of labor and leftist history.¹⁶ This book expands on this work, particularly by examining leftists' negotiation of national identities and internationalist solidarity. Many of the chapters highlight the ways that leftists tried, with varying levels of success, to bring international ideas into dialogue with national political cultures.

¹⁵ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Moon-Kie Jung, *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii's Interracial Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2011); Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

¹⁶ Aviva Chomsky, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Gerardo Leibner and James N. Green, eds., *Latin American Perspectives* 35, no. 2 (2008); Leon Fink, ed., *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jessica Stites Mor, ed., *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity in Cold War Latin America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013); de Laforcade and Shaffer, eds., *In Defiance of Boundaries*; Ernesto Semán, *Ambassadors of the Working Class: Argentina's International Labor Activists and Cold War Democracy in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Aldo Marchesi, *Latin America's Radical Left: Rebellion and Cold War in the Global 1960s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

The assumption that the left does not understand race, nation, gender, religion, or other social identities is partly a reflection of the tendency to equate the left with its formal, publicly recognized leadership. Most studies of the Latin American left have focused on top leaders and intellectuals, for understandable reasons: they are undeniably important and relatively easy to study.¹⁷ Despite the explosion in social or “bottom-up” history since the 1970s, the study of the left (with some stellar exceptions) has lagged behind in this regard.¹⁸ Even studies that try to highlight the role of common people in revolutionary processes often take a flat view of the left, identifying it entirely with its visible leaders and implying mass indifference or opposition to leftist governments and organizations.¹⁹

Studies of top leadership have made important contributions to our knowledge, but they also miss a great deal. A fuller understanding of the left must also consider the diverse thoughts and experiences of rank-and-file participants, supporters, sympathizers, and even bystanders and opponents, in addition to those of the formal leadership. The interactions within and among these various constituencies shaped

¹⁷ Robert J. Alexander, *Communism in Latin America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957); Michael Löwy, ed., *Le marxisme en Amérique Latine* (Paris: La Découverte, 1980); Sandra McGee Deutsch, “Gender and Sociopolitical Change in Twentieth-Century Latin America,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 71, no. 2 (1991): 259–306; Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*; Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Barry Carr and Steve Ellner, eds., *The Latin American Left: From the Fall of Allende to Perestroika* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993); José Aricó, *La hipótesis de Justo: Escritos sobre el socialismo en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999); Carlos Aguirre, ed., *Militantes, intelectuales y revolucionarios: Ensayos sobre marxismo e izquierda en América Latina* (Raleigh, NC: A Contracorriente, 2013).

¹⁸ An early exception was Peter Winn’s *Weavers of Revolution: The Yarur Workers and Chile’s Road to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Recent works include George Ciccarillo-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution*; Joaquín M. Chávez, *Poets and Prophets of the Resistance: Intellectuals and the Origins of El Salvador’s Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Marian E. Schlotterbeck, *Beyond the Vanguard: Everyday Revolutionaries in Allende’s Chile* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

¹⁹ For example, some of the scholarship on the Cuban Revolution that purports to take a bottom-up approach understates the extent of genuine support for the Castro government after 1959, implying that Cubans in general opposed the regime or that their allegiance was the result of manipulation. See Susan Eva Eckstein, *Back from the Future: Cuba under Castro*, second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003); Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

the left in myriad ways. Sometimes the influence of grassroots pressures was direct, as in the 1980s when indigenous peasants in Chiapas, Mexico, chastised the urban guerrillas who arrived in their lands with vanguardist pretensions and rigid conceptions of class struggle, in a productive clash of visions that led to the forming of the Zapatista National Liberation Army.²⁰ Other times it was indirect, as in 1975 when the radical Catholicism of Salvadoran peasants moved the leaders of the country's leading guerrilla faction to renounce their prior insistence on atheism.²¹ Attention to these encounters, dialogues, and conflicts – the *process* of revolutionary history – is a common feature in the chapters that follow.

This book does not merely seek to challenge dismissals of the left by uncovering a few interesting counterexamples. Nor does it seek to replace negative stereotypes with a romanticized history that glosses over the left's many real flaws. Rather, we want to go beyond simplistic Cold War narratives, including those sometimes found on the left, and work toward a deeper understanding of its complex and diverse history. Wherever possible, we trace the impacts of the debates and conflicts. Many of the encounters examined here had important consequences, helping to define the left and even the broader society. Even when defeated or suppressed, dissident voices sometimes exerted long-term impacts, with their demands partially reflected in the victors' future platforms and practice. This dynamic often prevailed even within vanguard parties, which generally only enjoyed mass support when the leaders accepted a significant degree of popular initiative.

Why have the narratives critiqued in this book proven so enduring, and why have scholars only recently begun to challenge them? I have hinted at some of the likely reasons: the methodological tendency to focus on formal leadership, the often subconscious ideological residue of the Cold War, institutional and cultural pressures within academia, and the spread of an individualistic understanding of “identity politics” that empties the term of its original anti-capitalist meaning.²² All these factors remain strong decades

²⁰ Adela Cedillo Cedillo, “El suspiro del silencio: De la reconstrucción de las Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional a la fundación del Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (1974–1983)” (Master's thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010); Christopher Gunderson, “The Provocative Cocktail: Intellectual Origins of the Zapatista Uprising, 1960–1994” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2013).

²¹ Marta Harnecker, *Con la mirada en alto: Historia de las FPL a través de sus dirigentes* (San Salvador: UCA, 1993), 64–65.

²² See the interview with Barbara Smith, one of the term's originators, in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2017), esp. 60–66.

after the Cold War's end. By the same token, however, events since 1991 have also shaped historical research in more fruitful ways. The emergence of highly visible movements of peasants, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, feminists, environmental defenders, the urban poor, and LGBTQ people has generated a new interest in those same actors in the pre-1991 era. Those actors take center stage in much of the new research, while the urban labor unions and political parties that were long the focus of left history are decentered. Sometimes this alternative focus has shed further light on the left's ethnocentrism and other shortcomings, but in other cases it has yielded new findings that compel us to rethink traditional narratives. In this sense, movements of the post-Cold War era have *possibilized* (as one might say in Spanish) the new lines of historical inquiry and revisionist arguments sampled in this book.²³

THE CHAPTERS

The case studies that follow represent some of the most innovative recent work on the history of the Latin American left. They span a broad geographic and temporal scope, reflecting the diversity of the left itself. While the book is far from comprehensive, it does seek to cover a wide range of countries, eras, and experiences. The chapters cover four major periods in the left's history: (1) the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, when Communist parties proliferated and diverse rebellions took place, sometimes featuring unprecedented interethnic alliances; (2) the Popular Front and early postwar period of 1935 through the early 1950s, characterized by interclass alliances in the war years followed by renewed left mobilization and state repression of leftists in the early Cold War; (3) the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which inspired revolutionary struggles from Mexico to Argentina; and (4) the wave of renewed revolutionary ferment concentrated in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Russian Revolution had deep impacts in Latin America. For one, it led to a decline in the influence of anarchists, who had pioneered many of the region's first labor unions, and a corresponding rise in Marxist influence on the left. Whereas anarchists eschewed party politics and the quest

²³ Among scholars of modern Latin America, Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado had an especially keen awareness of how contemporary events can lead to a productive rethinking of the past. See for instance his *Towards a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia*, trans. Anne Freeland (Calcutta: Seagull, 2018), and Luis Tapia, *The Production of Local Knowledge: History and Politics in the Work of René Zavaleta Mercado*, trans. Alison Spedding (Calcutta: Seagull, 2018).

for state power, the Bolshevik triumph in Russia appeared to signal the promise of state-oriented strategies. Communist parties cropped up around Latin America, a trend hastened by the 1919 formation of the Communist International, or Comintern.²⁴

One of the most interesting features of the 1920s and early 1930s were the left's attempts at interethnic organizing. In 1928 the Comintern began to emphasize the role of racial or "national" oppression alongside that of class, and also called for worker-peasant alliances against local feudal and capitalist forces.²⁵ This new orientation influenced Latin American communists. But perhaps just as important was the relative independence of many Marxists from the Soviet Union during these years. In contrast with the later Stalinist period, many Latin American Marxists espoused a fluid and creative approach to revolutionary organizing that sometimes entailed new alliances among the oppressed. A striking example is the massive 1927 agrarian revolt in southern Bolivia analyzed by Forrest Hylton in Chapter 1. Crucial to the revolt was an alliance between urban socialists, primarily artisans and intellectuals, and rural indigenous communities. Hylton shows that the alliance was based on a shared antipathy to predatory landlords and local officials. Also central was the demand for rural education, which the insurgents understood to be closely linked to the struggle for land and democracy. Although the revolt was suppressed, it stands as a major example of radical interethnic mobilization that declared war on capitalism, racism, and authoritarianism.

The Great Depression sent Latin America's oligarchic export economies into crisis, triggering large-scale revolts by workers and peasants in Cuba, El Salvador, Mexico, and elsewhere. In many of these cases the newly formed Communist parties played important organizing roles, sometimes expanding their prior political analysis and strategy to take into account racial oppression.²⁶ Many communists reached out to

²⁴ In keeping with standard usage, terms like *communist* and *socialist* are capitalized throughout this book when they refer to specific parties or organizations, and left in lowercase when they denote a more general ideological orientation.

²⁵ Marc Becker, "Mariátegui, the Comintern, and the Indigenous Question in Latin America," *Science & Society* 70, no. 4 (2006): 450–69. Much of the literature on the so-called Third Period (1928–35) emphasizes its sectarianism; see for example Manuel Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern, 1919–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). But it was also a period of creative and radical movement-building in many places.

²⁶ Gonzalo Sánchez, "Los bolcheviques del Líbano," in *Ensayos de historia social y política del siglo XX* (Bogotá: El Áncora, 1984), 11–111; Barry Carr, "The Mexican Communist Party and Agrarian Mobilization in the Laguna, 1920–1940: A Worker-Peasant

groups they had previously scorned in the hopes of building radical popular alliances that could put the nail in capitalism's coffin. Barry Carr's chapter on Cuba (Chapter 2) shows that Communists were the most vocal opponents of the anti-immigrant xenophobia that was enveloping Cuban society at both the elite and popular levels. While initially somewhat disdainful of black migrants from Jamaica, Haiti, and other Caribbean locations, the party had shifted its approach dramatically by 1933 and recruited a new cohort of militant black organizers. Black workers played a vital role in the sugar insurgency of late 1933, in which workers occupied dozens of plantations and mills in rural Cuba. Carr is careful not to overemphasize the role of the Communist Party, however, stressing also the "tradition[s] of struggle" and autonomous initiative of rank-and-file workers.²⁷ Here, as elsewhere, the course of rebellion was shaped by a dialogical encounter between the self-identified Left and the informal left.

A different type of alliance appeared during the Popular Front and World War II years, as many communists renounced class struggle and allied with more conservative forces against the threat of fascism. The war also brought closer economic, political, and military ties between Washington and most Latin American governments, including the growth of a military and intelligence apparatus that directed its energies not only against fascists – who were not very numerous or powerful in most of the region – but against leftists, whose cooperation against fascism would not spare them capitalists' wrath in the postwar period. Following a brief democratic opening at war's end, US-allied governments unleashed a wave of repression against domestic leftists and progressives, justifying their crackdowns through the rhetoric of Cold War anti-communism.²⁸ This juncture, spanning the late 1930s through the early 1950s, is the setting for the chapters by Becker, Power, and Young.

Marc Becker's account of the Ecuadorian indigenous movement (Chapter 3) highlights the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) wartime surveillance of the left, but also the vital dynamics that FBI spies missed. Despite being one of the most active and militant political forces in the country, the Ecuadorian Federation of Indians mostly escaped the

Alliance?" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (1987): 371–404; Gould and Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness*.

²⁷ See also Barry Carr, "Mill Occupations and Soviets: The Mobilisation of Sugar Workers in Cuba, 1917–1933," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 1 (1996): 129–58.

²⁸ Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough, eds., *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

FBI's spy apparatus. Racism blinded FBI agents to the realities of indigenous political action in the countryside. Becker shows, though, that Indian activists did indeed "advance their own agendas, both alone and in collaboration with sympathetic urban allies." This history of indigenous–*mestizo* cooperation has remained hidden in part due to the biases of state agents and reporters who failed to document it.

US intelligence agents were much more attuned to the threat of Puerto Rican dissidents, who suffered imprisonment and other repression at the hands of their colonial overlord. In Chapter 4, Margaret Power analyzes the complex and evolving relationship among nationalists and communists both on the island and in the United States. While the Nationalist Party was not officially anti-capitalist, it was in some respects more radical than its Communist counterparts, particularly in its demand for national liberation. Power traces transnational debates over political platforms and vision, focusing on the personal encounters between a handful of Nationalists and Communists. She shows that the friendships among these activists played an important role in shaping their political thought and practice in the 1940s and early 1950s. The left, she notes, is not simply "an impersonal response to oppressive structures in society." Understanding it requires us to go beyond "the official transcript" by paying careful attention to interpersonal relationships, in addition to ideas and analysis.

Personal relationships were likewise essential in the alliance that arose between urban and rural anarchists in La Paz, Bolivia, in 1946 – another instance of interethnic collaboration among radicals, this time driven by demands for labor rights, autonomy, and education. In Chapter 5, I highlight several factors to explain the growth of the alliance: the urbanites' flexibility and belief in organizational federalism, the rural activists' own past history of autonomous mobilization, and the work of coalition brokers who straddled the urban–rural, Indian–*mestizo* divide. Those factors enabled the anarchists to take advantage of a temporary political opening in 1946. The opening slammed shut in 1947, when the movement was all but extinguished by state repression.

The third period covered in the book, stretching from 1959 until the early 1970s, has been the subject of many scholarly studies. The Cuban Revolution itself has inspired thousands of books and articles, though overwhelmingly focused on the leadership of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Michelle Chase's study (Chapter 6) breaks with this pattern, using new archival sources to uncover the role of progressive and radical women in the early development of the revolution. Chase focuses on the

Cuban women who attended an international women's conference in Santiago, Chile, in November 1959. The conference was a key site of debate over Cuban women's visions for the revolution, and also plugged the Cuban attendees into a transnational network of radical women. Chase uses the conference to reassess the state-backed Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), founded the next year. By analyzing the roles of diverse women in the process, she challenges the common argument that the FMC was "merely a top-down mass organization established by the revolutionary leadership to ensure women's support."

Among the many reverberations of the Cuban Revolution was the way it gave hope to radicals across the so-called Third World, inspiring numerous guerrilla campaigns in Latin America alone. Many of these campaigns were short-lived and easily repressed. Aldo Marchesi's chapter sheds light on how activists in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay made those ill-fated decisions. In Chapter 7, Marchesi traces the emergence of a militant transnational political culture, influenced by the "new" left of the 1960s, that critiqued existing leftist currents and embraced armed struggle as the only way forward. His subjects dramatically underestimated the obstacles to revolution, however. They placed extreme stress on the importance of ideology, which led them to attribute all setbacks to "ideological weakness" and to adopt counterproductive remedies. Like the book's other authors, Marchesi stresses the role of political culture in shaping the left's actions, but he shows how, in this case, those actions proved detrimental to the left's prospects.

The leftist opposition in the southwestern Mexican state of Guerrero offers an instructive contrast. Unlike the Southern Cone militants, Guerrero's leftists garnered considerable popular support. In Chapter 8, O'Neill Blacker-Hanson shows how Genaro Vázquez, Lucio Cabañas, and other leftists made astute use of the Mexican state's own weapons, namely its educational system and the radical promises of the 1910 revolution. They drew from Marxism, but they also framed their struggle in terms of Mexico's own revolutionary nationalism. Blacker-Hanson describes Vázquez and Cabañas's non-dogmatic application of Marxist ideology to their local context, though she also asks whether their eventual shift away from nationalist discourse may have cost them some popular support. In any case, the Mexican state suppressed the threat through a "dirty war" that murdered hundreds of guerrillas and civilians in the early 1970s, the full details of which are only beginning to come to light.²⁹

²⁹ O'Neill Blacker, "Cold War in the Countryside: Conflict in Guerrero, Mexico," *The Americas* 66, no. 2 (2009): 181–210; Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant*

By the early 1970s the number of active Latin American guerrilla struggles had declined, due to their suppression by militaries and right-wing death squads and perhaps also to the 1970 electoral triumph of Chilean socialist Salvador Allende.³⁰ However, the 1973 US-backed military overthrow of Allende signaled that neither Washington nor Latin American elites would tolerate a democratic transition to socialism. Despite its long record of formal democratic rule, Chile joined the ranks of countries ruled by savage military regimes. Few dictatorships were as repressive as those in Central America, which witnessed the growth of guerrilla insurgencies in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Central America exemplifies the profound asymmetries of violence and power between left and right in twentieth-century Latin America: while the left sometimes committed human rights abuses, they were infrequent and relatively mild compared to the mass slaughter, torture, rape, and disappearances perpetrated by right-wing forces.³¹ Moreover, the right possessed the formidable advantages of state power, US support, and control over the economy and media.³²

The Central American revolutionary movements were shaped by more than just state repression, though. Their growth and political trajectory were contested, dynamic processes shaped by rank-and-file revolutionaries, guerrilla commanders, and outside entities like the state.³³ Betsy Konefal's study of Guatemala (Chapter 9) highlights the extent to which human choices and

Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For a broader account see Gladys McCormick, "The Last Door: Political Prisoners and the Use of Torture in Mexico's Dirty War," *The Americas* 74, no. 1 (2017): 57–81.

³⁰ The Allende period has generated exciting new research over the past two decades. In addition to sources cited above, see many recent articles in the Chilean–Russian journal *Izquierdas* (www.izquierdas.cl/).

³¹ According to survivor testimonies, the right in El Salvador and Guatemala committed at least 85 and 93 percent of violent attacks, respectively. See UN Security Council, Annex, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador* (New York: United Nations, 1993), 35–36; Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala: Memoria del silencio* (Guatemala City: CEH, 1999), 5: 42, 52.

³² Some assert that Cuban and Soviet aid to Latin American leftists after 1959 was on a par with US and other foreign aid to the right, but this claim is easily refuted. Tellingly, Brands tries to support the claim by listing a series of Cuban and Soviet monetary transfers from the Castro government to Latin American guerrillas, but in no case did the transfers exceed \$1 million (*Latin America's Cold War*, 42). US aid to El Salvador alone averaged well over \$1 million *per day* during the country's twelve-year civil war.

³³ Dirk Kruijt, *Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America* (London: Zed, 2008); Konefal, *For Every Indio*; Montoya, *Gendered Scenarios*; Chávez, *Poets and Prophets*; Sierra Becerra, "Insurgent Butterflies."

relationships shaped the country's revolutionary movement. Elsewhere Konefal has shown how Maya activists pushed the armed left to incorporate anti-racism and cultural demands into the revolutionary struggle. Many Mayas participated in the guerrilla struggle, while others became deeply disillusioned with *ladino* (non-indigenous) leftists for de-emphasizing ethnic identity and culture.³⁴ Her chapter here adds another layer to this analysis. She uses a riveting tale about the state's kidnapping of a Maya revolutionary, Emeterio Toj, to explore the role of personal trust in political relationships. When Toj escaped and tried to return to the guerrillas, they would surely have taken him for a spy if not for the intervention of a particular commander, whose prior experience in Maya villages helped him determine that Toj had not betrayed the movement.

The importance of human choices and actions is also evident in Diana Sierra Becerra's study of radical women in El Salvador's FMLN guerrilla coalition in Chapter 10, which challenges those who dismiss the FMLN as sexist, class-reductionist, and excessively focused on military struggle. By expanding the focus beyond the top commanders, Sierra Becerra shows that rank-and-file women, including civilians, were vital players in the political organizing work that undergirded the FMLN's military strength. Taking up arms did not signify the abandonment of grassroots organizing and educational work. Perhaps most importantly, many revolutionary women developed a feminist consciousness and practice in the course of wartime struggles, and they succeeded in influencing gender relations in the guerrilla territories. This story challenges Cold War binaries that pit armed struggle against feminism and feminism against socialism.

HISTORY AND THE RADICAL IMAGINATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Why dwell on this history? Haven't post-Cold War developments fundamentally changed the region? Is the left even relevant in today's context of neoliberal globalization, when the very idea of utopias invites scorn from intellectuals and politicians, and when talk of socialism – at least in the radical sense of working-class control of the economy – is often derided as an archaic “leftover” of a bygone era?³⁵

³⁴ Konefal, *For Every Indio*.

³⁵ Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*; Jorge G. Castañeda and Marco A. Morales, eds., *Leftovers: Tales of the Two Latin American Lefts* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Latin America has indeed changed since the peace accords and democratizations of the late twentieth century, with many strategic implications for the left. The route of armed struggle appears entirely futile; even the Colombian FARC disarmed in 2016. Conversely, the electoral sphere is more open to the left than at any prior point, with a raft of left-leaning (“Pink Tide”) governments elected since 1999. At the same time, however, capitalists have retained enormous power. Even modest progressive reforms still face unremitting hostility from elite sectors, who possess formidable power to block or hinder them, either through overt opposition – including successful coups in Haiti, Honduras, Paraguay, and Brazil – or by shifting their investments elsewhere. The promoters of neoliberalism have taken steps to lock in their own reforms and insulate economic policy from democratic input, tying the hands of any would-be progressive reformers. The result in most Latin American countries has been a shallow version of democracy in which many of the vital questions about institutions and policies are beyond the control of the electorate.³⁶

Furthermore, the social landscape in which the twentieth-century left grew has been greatly eroded. In most countries the organized left is a shell of its former self, reduced through a combination of overwhelming state terror in the 1970s and 1980s and the neoliberal restructuring that has weakened labor unions. At a broader cultural level, the consolidation of the neoliberal order and urban consumerism have corroded social bonds and contributed to the depoliticization of popular sectors. High levels of urban crime and violence across the region are both consequences and causes of these trends.³⁷ In turn, street crime has helped fuel a resurgence of right-wing parties that stoke “law-and-order” sentiment, most notably with the 2018 election of the neofascist Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil.

Far from rendering the left obsolete, though, the changes of recent decades make it more relevant than ever. The Pink Tide of the early twenty-first century resulted from massive public condemnation of poverty, inequality, and the neoliberal economic policies that exacerbate them. Once in power, left-leaning governments adopted significant, albeit

³⁶ William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); James E. Mahon, Jr., *Mobile Capital and Latin American Development* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); John Crabtree and Francisco Durand, *Peru: Elite Power and Political Capture* (London: Zed, 2017).

³⁷ See especially Deborah T. Levenson, *Adiós Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

quite modest, policy changes that reduced poverty and injustice and asserted a degree of independence from the imperial centers. Most centrist and right-wing politicians, meanwhile, still support the basics of neoliberalism and lack a minimally viable project for addressing the region's profound economic, social, and ecological problems.³⁸

The Pink Tide governments have succeeded in some ways and failed in others. Certainly they have not been as radical as many leftists had hoped, and the anti-capitalist aspirations of many leftist leaders have visibly waned since the 1970s and 1980s. Yet to the extent that these governments have faltered, the reason is not an excess of radicalism but rather their inability or unwillingness to confront capitalist power and political exclusion in more aggressive ways. Those governments' shortcomings hardly invalidate the importance of the left. In fact, the apparent stagnation of many Pink Tide projects only confirms the need to revisit some of the vibrant radical debates that took place in eras past.³⁹

Collectively, the stories in this book are important for at least two reasons. First, there is value in simply uncovering hidden histories of resistance to oppression. As historian Jeffrey Gould writes, "In a world in which the very idea of fundamental social change has become chimerical, where elementary forms of human solidarity seem utopian," past examples of solidarity, courage, and creativity "should be excavated and remembered."⁴⁰ Glimpsing these forgotten moments can enhance our capacity for political action, combating the temptation to succumb to

³⁸ In this regard the strategies of center and right parties today are revealing: candidates tend to de-emphasize their neoliberal beliefs, instead garnering support by promising to stamp out crime and corruption and by riding waves of popular discontent with economic problems for which they and their sponsors are largely responsible.

³⁹ Among many good works on the twenty-first-century left see Emir Sader, *The New Mole: Paths of the Latin American Left* (London: Verso, 2011); Jeffrey R. Webber and Barry Carr, eds., *The New Latin American Left: Cracks in the Empire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013); Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Vanden, and Marc Becker, eds., *Rethinking Latin American Social Movements: Radical Action from Below* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez*, and *Building the Commune: Radical Democracy in Venezuela* (London: Verso, 2016); Jeffrey R. Webber, *The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2017); Dario Azzellini, *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2018); Steve Ellner, ed., *Latin America's Pink Tide: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

⁴⁰ Jeffrey L. Gould, "On the Road to 'El Porvenir': Revolutionary and Counterrevolutionary Violence in El Salvador and Nicaragua," in *A Century of Revolution*, ed. Grandin and Joseph, 116.

cynicism at a time when violence, deprivation, ecological destruction, and impunity for the perpetrators often seem overwhelming and inevitable. One of capitalism's greatest triumphs in the Cold War was to suppress the belief that a fundamentally different order is possible. For that reason alone, the radical ambitions of past leftists, and their attempts to put those ideas into practice, deserve our attention.

Beyond just celebrating past resistance, the book also seeks to inform current-day political practice by critically engaging with the thought and actions of twentieth-century leftists. Past struggles for emancipation offer many important lessons, both inspiring and cautionary. One such lesson, implicit in many of the chapters that follow, is that the left has been most successful – and most revolutionary – when it has maintained internal democracy, self-reflexivity, and humility vis-à-vis the constituencies it seeks to organize. Readers are invited to engage with our arguments and draw their own lessons.