Book Review

Theorizing the Revolutionary Political Action of Social Movements during the Pink Tide

by
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Dario N. Azzellini *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018.

Anthony Pahnke *Brazil's Long Revolution: Radical Achievements of the Landless Workers Movement*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018.

The centrality of the state in leading political change is a recurring theme in the literature on social change, especially in Latin America. During the pink tide, considerable attention was given to what left-leaning governments and parties did to promote such change and how leftist movements faced the "dilemma of the state"—working with an "allied government" (Azzellini, 2018: 6; Pahnke, 2018: 157; Spanakos and Pantoulas, 2016). This was particularly acute among groups that were zealous of establishing and defending local autonomy such as the groups associated with the Movimiento Bolivariano (Bolivarian Movement) in Venezuela and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement, led by the MST) in Brazil (see Fernandes, 2010; Mészáros, 2013; Wolford, 2010). Recent books by Dario Azzellini and Anthony Pahnke examine tensions between movement, political action, and government in these two movements.

Azzellini's *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below* examines historical accounts of numerous radical groups and posits that the Proceso (the Bolivarian Revolutionary 'Process') is "complex and contradictory, entailing both cooperation and conflict," and should be "characterized by a two-track construction: from below (constituent power) and from above (constituted power)" (6). The Proceso aims "to redefine the state from below and proposes a renewed concept of popular power." It "draws its power from its diversity, and does not seek homogenization." This diversity includes different contentious actors (such as urban barrio residents, peasant and indigenous communities, and workers' factories [Angosto-Ferrández, 2015; Smilde and Hellinger, 2011]), economic actors (state capitalists, state employees, informal workers, and communes), and people across the partisan and ideological spectrum. Whereas other accounts see the drawing together of such diverse groups through populism and charismatic figures, Azzellini highlights a shared effort to awaken, build, and use constituent power so that people in communities have more decision-making power over local affairs.

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For Azzellini, former President Chávez was the group's most important "interlocutor," consistently encouraging allied groups to be rebels while not always endorsing their rebellion. Azzellini's "two-track" approach—in which popular groups seeking to exercise constituent power, advocated by the state, often face constraints from the same state—is especially helpful. The Movimiento Democrático Popular (Settlers' Movement—MDP) and the *comités de tierra urbana* (urban land committees), for instance, emerged from the state's initial efforts but, as Azzellini documents, quickly "created an autonomous structure and became a central pillar of popular organization in the barrios" (73), leading to demands for decision-making power that reflected conflict between constituent (them) and constituted (the allied pro-Chávez ministry or official) power. Azzellini quotes an interviewee discussing a conflict between the urban land committees and the Ministry of Popular Power for Housing and Habitat (75) as saying:

> We have told the Ministry of Housing that our fundamental problem is not that they give us resources and that they finance our projects, but that we want to define housing policy. . . . We have always said that we must advance in the building of a new society with the state, without the state, and against the state. The relation with the state is not defined by us but by the willingness of the state to subordinate itself to the interests of the pueblo.

Perhaps the most valuable part of this very well-researched and well-argued book is its rich description and careful analysis of multiple actors within various local groups and organizations. Azzellini argues that the state and the movements have competing logics. State sponsorship can amplify the resources and ability of movements to act but can harm their "organic growth" and development, thereby potentially reducing the space and creativity needed for the movement's vision. The state is an occasional ally, but its bureaucratizing tendencies create an inherent tension, since *poder popular* (popular power) must "overcome the bourgeois state" (56). In this anti-Leninist reading, Azzellini intuits the possibility—perhaps even inevitability—of the current challenge for the Bolivarian movements: the Maduro government has intensified the very bureaucratizing logics critiqued by Azzellini, and the movements loyal to the Proceso can expect little support if an opposition government takes power. Will one generation of Bolivarian leadership be enough to allow such movements and ideas to become a permanent part of Venezuelan politics?

A window into such possibilities—cognizant of the differences in contexts, characters, ideas, strategies, and structural conditions—might reveal the current and future prospects of the MST. Long recognized as Latin America's largest social movement, it enjoyed almost a decade and a half (2003–2016) of sympathetic federal government,[1] but the elevation of Michel Temer to the presidency radically shifted the support the MST could expect and the election of Jair Bolsonaro further accentuated that tendency. Anthony Pahnke's *Brazil's Long Revolution: Radical Achievements of the Landless Workers Movement* offers much to readers both about the MST and about Brazil's current political conjuncture (Hunter and Power, 2019).

Pahnke examines the historical, economic, and political conditions that enabled the development of the MST in a twofold argument. First, he sees the MST's activism as a mix of *pau* (direct confrontation via illegal and/or extralegal tactics) and *prosa* (negotiation via legal and institutional channels) that yields a "contradictory relationship with state authority" (7). Given that Pahnke considers that "the current incorporation of Marxism into social movement studies lacks . . . an explicit theorization of revolutionary political action and, concomitantly, the concept of sovereignty" (25), he seeks to extend Carl Schmitt's theory of the telluric partisan, who engages in "extralegal political action

[that] combines offensive and defensive practices" (29) to assert control and defense of territory. Specifically, Schmitt's discussion of the partisan's irregularity captures the nature of the MSTs legally ambiguous signature mode of contention, land occupation (35–36).[2] Second, Pahnke argues that the movement's resistance is "revolutionary, particularly in the creation and development of a dual power form of organization vis-à-vis the Brazilian state" (7). It is with this second argument that Pahnke's book departs most clearly from previous research on the MST, asserting that the movement is "working against and through state power" to erode the institutionalized public/private divide in a liberal democratic context (52).

To explain the nature and claims of the MST's revolutionary political action, Pahnke constructs a theoretical approach that integrates Lenin's (1932) description of dual power, Schmitt's (2007) writings on the theory of the partisan and his concept of the political, involving the friend/enemy distinction, and Negri's (1999) and Dussel's (2006) theorization of constitutive power. His argument finds empirical support in ethnographic research that explores the *núcleos de base* (grassroots units) in Brazil. With their "approving critiquing, deliberating, and planning actions" in itinerant schools, movement-organized cooperatives, and encampments, their claims to sovereignty based on occupation of land, and their use of a language of constituent power, these units administer services typically within the domain of the Brazilian government (64).

While the movement obtained resources, legal recognition, and institutional support for agrarian reform, its land occupations and encampments steadily declined under Workers' Party governance. Pahnke interprets this phase as indicative of the movement's "revolutionary consolidation" rather than demobilization. In particular, he interprets its embrace of agro-ecology, recruitment of new members (such as the unemployed in the growing informal sector), and training of new leadership capable of enhancing agro-ecology practices and sustaining the MST's communitarian identity (177–179). These intramovement changes and lessons learned over time point to the MST's ability to adapt from the *luta pela terra* (struggle for land) to the *luta na terra* (struggle on the land) and to secure land occupation gains from previous eras (191). But how permanent is the reappropriation of land, and does the government not have the ability and right to administer spaces in accordance with a constitutional mandate? While the claims of the MST (or any other social movement) may center on governing as an alternative, the elected government may certainly contest these claims and defend *its* sovereignty.

Popular sovereignty is easier to conceive of than to put into practice, as ultimately it requires some form of agent who acts intertemporally. The scholarship of Azzellini and Pahnke examines organized groups that have worked with and against the state and its officials, the traditional agents of popular sovereignty in the modern West. It provides insight into the contemporary situation, in which working with the state is proving more challenging for leftist, autonomist movements in Latin America as political parties and leaders of the right have reemerged, partially in response to citizen concerns that developed under the governments of the pink tide. However much the state was transformed under sympathetic governments, it is now subject to transformation by a very different group of leaders and movements. For instance, the Bolsonaro administration has consistently depicted the MST's political action as a form of terrorism. This is a deliberate rejection of what had been an increasingly shared public recognition of the MST in previous years, one that accepted the movement's mode of contention as *occupation* and not *invasion* (Mészáros, 2013: 76, 78). This move toward delegitimizing and criminalizing the MST may be seen as part of a broader countermovement against previous government policies (budget cuts to subsidized credit programs for small farmers, more rural violence [Gurr, 2017; PLC, 2018]) since Michel Temer's government. In

Venezuela the prospects of the various currents within the Bolivarian movement are precarious after the proclamation of Juan Guaidó as interim president. While Guaidó is a president without a state apparatus, President Maduro struggles to hold onto a fragmenting and increasingly weak state apparatus. This has only partially empowered the political opposition while very much weakening Bolivarian groups. Ultimately, whatever material support, rhetorical encouragement, and legal inaction (allowing for extralegal tactics and maneuvers) has been experienced, the movements can and should expect a reversal.

Theoretically, these books also complicate the characterization of social movements during the pink tide. While for Pahnke revolutionary movements such as the MST engage in a duality (in the Leninist interpretation) that is possible primarily because of the movement's reliance on and challenge to constitutional provisions, for Azzellini this characterization of the movement's approach would render it a force lacking revolutionary character, particularly because law and constitutionalism are "in contradiction" with constituent power in that the former "neutraliz[es] the potent historical motor of constituent power" (35). Instead, for Azzellini, revolution is interpreted as a process that "comes into effect when the multitude meets the potential, the capacity to emanate, design, mold, and create something new without having to derive it from, or be subject to, that which already exists" (24; see Virno, 2003; 2004); Therefore, the juxtaposition of these varying theoretical positions on revolutionary political action (dual power and the two-track process) and the evaluation of the movements in Brazil and Venezuela compel reconsideration of the relationship between constituent power and political action. The books reviewed here offer valuable contributions on the origins and evolution of two of Latin America's most prominent social movements.

NOTES

1. While the coalition of the Cardoso government was not, on balance, sympathetic, many within it were sympathetic to the MST's goals if not always to its tactics (Pereira, 2004).

2. Pahnke's discussion here stems from the common observation that while the MST cannot be entirely autonomous from the state, it nonetheless engages in assertive tactics to make zero-sum claims (sovereignty over a given territory, agrarian reform, and so on) (see Mészáros, 2013).

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