

Edward J. McCaughan. *Reinventing Revolution: The Renovation of Left Discourse in Cuba and Mexico.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1997. xiii + 207 pp. \$20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8133-3547-6.



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As the dust settles following the end of the Cold War, and a global crisis of neo-liberalism looms on the horizon, the excavation and reinvention of the Left in Latin America and around the world has gained in scope and significance.[1] Edward J. McCaughan's book represents an engaging contribution to this wider trend. Focusing on Mexico and Cuba, his overall perspective combines an emphasis on the sociology of knowledge and an approach to historical political economy grounded in world-system theory (p. 17). Based on interviews with over seventy Mexican and Cuban political activists and intellectuals, he attempts to diagnose the politico-intellectual condition of the post-Cold War Left in Latin America. At the outset, McCaughan argues that out of the current "paradigm crisis" of the Left, important "renovative ideas" are emerging which "contribute to alternative strategies for transcending "an era of disintegration" and the building of "a more humane world order". In his view, the "potential impact of these ideas is heightened by the crisis facing ruling elites," as a result of "their failure, as yet, to replace the old cooptive strategies of liberalism (in the core) and developmentalism (elsewhere) with

equally effective modes of domination." He is confident that the enthusiasm for neo-liberalism amongst elites in North America and Western Europe (and elsewhere) will "wane as the full impact of neoliberalism's social and environmental devastation is more broadly acknowledged." And, as "the neoliberal consensus breaks down" the growing number of "serious conflicts already evident among the world's ruling classes" will probably "deepen," providing new openings for a renovated Left in Latin America and beyond (p. 6).

The author distinguishes his approach to the crisis confronting the Left in Latin America from that taken by Jorge Castaneda in his influential book, *Utopia Unarmed*. [2] Apart from differences of methodology, McCaughan's "findings" diverge substantially from Castaneda's insofar as the latter places much of his emphasis on the way in "which a significant current of the Latin American left has rejected the possibility of revolutionary change." McCaughan emphasizes that, according to Castaneda, progressive intellectuals and activists in Latin America ought to adopt, and have adopted, the "more viable" and "pragmatic strate-

gy of reforming the region's political and economic systems into a Latin American version of social democracy." Although this represents "a decidedly more humane, more just, and more inclusive brand of capitalism", it is, says the author, "capitalism nonetheless." McCaughan notes that his own research certainly points to the existence of "liberal-minded reformism" as an increasingly significant current among left-leaning Mexican and Cuban intellectuals, at the same time as "more orthodox socialist tendencies" continue to exercise some influence. However, he argues that an important "third current," which is not really identified by Castaneda, is also emerging. This new strand is "neither orthodox socialist nor liberal but rather renovative." Furthermore, according to McCaughan it is "potentially far more significant." He argues that renovative intellectuals are "those leftists who still emphasize social goals and social, even collectivist, political and economic visions" at the same time as they are "critical of both statist-socialist and liberal approaches." He also emphasizes that the newly emergent "renovative left is sustained by the ideal, utopian perhaps, of an egalitarian, socially just, and democratic, non-capitalist world-system" (pp. 11-12).

In order to explore the contours of this new renovative left and its relationship to liberal reformism and socialist orthodoxy, McCaughan's book is organized thematically. Apart from an introductory chapter, a general chapter on politico-intellectual and socio-economic trends between the 1960s and the 1980s and a concluding chapter, there are two chapters on 'democracy,' two chapters on 'socialism' and two chapters on 'national sovereignty.' To begin with the question of 'democracy,' he argues that the renovative left in Mexico and Cuba seeks to "transcend both liberal and Marxist conceptions of democracy." On the one hand, drawing on liberalism, renovators have emphasized the significance of the rule of law and political rights, as well as electoral democracy and parliamentary institutions. On the other hand, they continue to draw on marxism and conceive

of democracy "as a process of 'socializing power'" which involves wealth redistribution and increased "popular control over the economy." Renovators remain committed not only to reforming the political system, but to ideas about "workers self-management" and a variety of "co-ownership schemes", along with the "democratization and professionalization of state enterprises." In fact, McCaughan emphasizes that renovators "talk less about reducing the state than they do about democratizing and professionalizing" it, at the same time as they "also give considerable attention to strengthening the autonomy of civil society vis a vis the state and the parties of the left." For example, in Cuba, renovators talk of the significance and potential of women's centres and local popular councils, as well as new NGOs, as political spaces which is relatively free from Communist Party influence, while in Mexico they are especially interested in ways to construct a party of the left which provides political representation, but does not marginalize or eliminate the broad social movement network and their organisations. In Mexico, the renovative left are already involved in a wide range of attempts to "redefine democracy" which range from the empowerment of urban community organisations to a major nation-wide movement in support of the demands of the Zapatistas. By contrast, the renovative left in Cuba continues to be constrained by the authoritarianism of the Cuban Communist Party; however, McCaughan argues that "the present crisis in Cuba holds promise as well as danger" (pp. 98-99).

On the issue of 'socialism,' what "most clearly" differentiates "the renovators from the defenders of socialist orthodoxy" (who still have considerable influence in Cuba) is the renovators "acceptance of the limited options available in the aftermath of capitalism's recent triumphs." In this context, the renovators are united by a "sense of obligation to offer realistic immediate alternatives to alleviate the suffering of large sectors of society." This results in a "willingness to consider ideas from liberal political economy" in the creation of

their alternatives. At the same time, what "most clearly" distinguishes renovators from the liberal-left, according to McCaughan, is their view that both an "immediate alternative" to neoliberalism and "a long-term alternative to capitalism are necessary and possible". The author emphasizes that Mexican and Cuban renovators repeatedly questioned the neoliberal emphasis on the "magic" of the market and the "evil" of the state (p. 127). In this context, the "renovative left" in Mexico continues to inspire and sustain itself with long-term visions of a new, socialist oriented world-system" at the same time as "Cuban renovators try to figure out how to find a niche for their nation in today's brutal capitalist world-system without subjecting their society to a process of desocialization and renewed class differentiation" (p. 134). Meanwhile, on the issue of 'national sovereignty,' McCaughan argues that, although "it is not yet a fully defined notion, relative national autonomy seems to be emerging as successor to a once-imagined full national sovereignty." According to the renovators, there are at least five important aspects involved in the mediation of national autonomy in the post-Cold War era. They emphasize the need for a "strong, democratic state acting in the interests of the majority," some kind of regional integration in the Americas and broad-based cross-border alliances between social forces opposed to neoliberalism. They also point to the need for the "development of national scientific-technical capacity and industries in cutting-edge technologies" as well as the reinvigoration of national culture in order to defend the 'nation.' The author argues that the "crafting" of "a new nationalism in the context of a post-Cold War, post-Marxist world" is "one of the left's most important challenges" and the ideas articulated by many of the Mexican and Cuban intellectuals who he interviewed "make an important contribution toward that goal" (p. 181). McCaughan also emphasizes that, although the "structural realities of life in the semi-periphery encourage the search for antisystemic alternatives," they "do not guarantee the

outcome of such pursuit". But, he concludes that the political and popular cultures of Mexico and Cuba, grounded in two of the "great nationalist revolutions" of the twentieth century, can work to ensure that the Left in these two countries is "less susceptible to neoliberal discourse" (p. 196, also see 141-145).

This book is refreshing in its optimism, and that optimism is grounded in a detailed discussion of the work and ideas of a wide range of activists and intellectuals. *Reinventing Revolution* represents an important attempt to look at how these activists and intellectuals are working to break the neo-liberal log-jam in Latin America. Interestingly its publication coincided with the onset of the East Asian crisis, an event which may well be the catalyst for the global crisis of neo-liberalism foreshadowed by McCaughan. As he emphasizes a wider crisis of neo-liberalism will open up the possibility for progressive alternatives to gain ground and even overturn the dominant free-market mythologies of the late twentieth century. [3] It is here, however, where, my main criticism of *Reinventing Revolution* comes into play. Although world-system theory can be insightful, as adumbrated by McCaughan, it continues to represent historical development as occurring in stages, while dividing the world far too neatly into core, semi-periphery and periphery. More particularly, while I agree with his critique of liberal reformists such as Castaneda, the way that he and the renovators apparently assume that a socialist world-systemic future remains a relevant and viable goal in the post-Cold War era is problematic. While, he represents the medium- to long-term goals of the renovators to be the building of alternatives to capitalism, it seems to me that they are really talking about alternatives within capitalism even in the long-term. I would argue that a key aspect which ought to differentiate renovated marxism and socialism from its more traditional currents ought to be a recognition that history is not a linear process which involves some sort of passage from capitalism to socialism. Nor should it be

assumed that poverty, inequality, and injustice can only be ultimately banished with the end of capitalism. Such a linear and unitary conception of capitalism and its history obscures the wide range of forms which capitalism has taken and the potential for social progress and the creation of alternatives within capitalism. The teleology of earlier marxist theory and practice, and of world-system theory (and their reliance on universal ideas about liberation and class) was part of the problem in the same way that the universal descriptions and prescriptions provided by neo-liberalism (which are based on a romanticised conception of Anglo-American history) are also part of the problem in Latin America. For example, in the case of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico, Subcomandante Marcos has acknowledged the important influence of traditional marxist currents on the movement, but he has also emphasized that the EZLN is a "hybrid" which emerged from "a confrontation, of a collision in which, luckily I believe, we (the traditional marxists) lost." [4] Ultimately, McCaughan and the renovators continued reliance on a vision of the future which rests on what appears to be relatively traditional marxist and socialist assumptions about the end of capitalism may reinforce many of the shortcomings associated with the more traditional marxist and socialist projects rooted in the Cold War era. Despite these criticisms, and the problems which they raise, this is a stimulating book which should be read by anyone interested in the search for alternatives to neo-liberalism in Latin America.

Notes:

[1]. For example, see Marta Harnecker, *América Latina, Izquierda y Crisis Actual* [Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1990]. Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, eds., *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy and Democracy* [Boulder: Westview Press, 1992]. Richard L. Harris, *Marxism, Socialism and Democracy in Latin America* [Boulder: Westview Press, 1992]. James

Petras and Morris Morley, *Latin America in the Time of Cholera: Electoral Politics, Market Economics and Permanent Crisis* [London: Routledge, 1992]. Barry Carr and Steve Ellner, *The Latin American Left: >From the Fall of Allende to Perestroika* [Boulder: Westview Press, 1993]. Susanne Jonas and Edward J. McCaughan, eds. *Latin America Faces the Twenty-First Century: Reconstructing a Social Justice Agenda* [Boulder: Westview Press, 1994]. James Petras, "Latin America: Resurgence of the Left" *New Left Review* no. 223. May/June 1997. James Petras, *The Left Strikes Back: Class Conflict in the Age of Neoliberalism* [Boulder: Westview Press, 1998]. Also see Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India* [Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993]. Mark T. Berger, "Post-Cold War Capitalism: Modernisation and Modes of Resistance After the Fall" *Third World Quarterly: Journal of Emerging Areas* vol. 16. no. 4. 1995. Arif Dirlik, *After the Revolution: Waking to Global Capitalism* [London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994]. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* [London: Routledge, 1994]. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, eds. *Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective* [London: Routledge, 1995]. Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* [New York: The New Press, 1997]. Donald Sassoon, ed., *Looking Left: Socialism in Europe After the Cold War* [New York: The New Press, 1997].

[2]. Jorge Castaneda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* [New York: Vintage, 1994; first published 1993]. For a thorough and critical, but sympathetic review of Castaneda, see James Dunkerley, "Beyond Utopia: The State of the Left in Latin America" *New Left Review* no. 206. July/August 1994.

[3]. Mark T. Berger, "Up From Neo-Liberalism: Free-Market Mythologies and the Coming Crisis of Global Capitalism" *Third World Quarterly: Jour-*

nal of Emerging Areas vol. 20. no. 2. 1999. (forthcoming).

[4]. Subcomandante Marcos cited in Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1998]. pp.166-167.

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