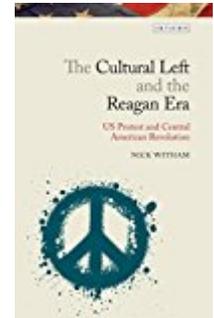


Nick Witham. *The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: U.S. Protest and the Central American Revolutions.* London: I. B. Tauris, 2015. x + 240 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78453-196-6.



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Nick Witham's *The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: US Protest and Central American Revolution* is an examination of Anglo-American left-wing cultural production in solidarity with Central American revolutionaries during the long 1980s. Its goals are twofold. First, it seeks to establish that, despite the 1980s being understood as the "age of Reagan," political activists challenged Reagan's way of seeing the world in that decade. The book's central claim is that "the cultural work that developed alongside the movement in solidarity with the people of Central America should be considered as a significant, if by no means dominant, feature of the landscape of 1980s US political and cultural history" (p. 2). The second goal is to describe the features of that cultural production, including its internal divisions and the variety of approaches that were taken.

Drawing from a division that appeared in a 1983 paper produced by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), Witham identifies three currents within the Central American solidarity movement: anti-intervention-

ism, solidarity, and anti-imperialism. Since solidarity defined the basic position of organizations such as CISPES and NicaNet (the Nicaragua Network), it is the division between anti-interventionist and anti-imperialist views that he uses to examine cultural production within the era. Anti-imperialism, as used here, implies an active embrace of the revolutionary movements. The anti-imperialists believed that the victory of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua in 1979, and the potential victory of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador, were genuinely advancing the cause of justice. But not everyone who opposed US foreign policy in Central America in the 1980s fully endorsed these revolutionary movements. There was a wider set of anti-interventionists who may not have shared the politics of the FMLN or FSLN, or may have remained agnostic about them. Still, these anti-interventionists were critical of US foreign policy of the era, including support for the Nicaraguan anti-FSLN Contras and the Salvadoran military's counterin-

surgent efforts. Both groups opposed US foreign policy towards Central America. But anti-imperialism implied radical politics, while most anti-interventionists were liberals.

Witham's book is divided into six main chapters: two dealing with what he describes as "intellectual culture," two with "press culture," and two with "film culture." In each case, Witham is interested in the ways that this cultural production interacted with the solidarity movements, and how the anti-interventionists and anti-imperialists interacted with one another. In a chapter on *The Nation* magazine, for example, he quotes its former editor Victor Navasky as describing its orientation as one of a "long running debate/argument/conversation between radicals and liberals" (p. 73). The magazine was generally sympathetic to the revolutionary movements, and in 1981 even produced a pamphlet intended to inform activists on issues relating to El Salvador. But *The Nation* was also occasionally critical. After Nicaragua's junta declined to relax emergency controls after its electoral victory in 1985, for example, *The Nation* published an article by Michael Massing asking "hard questions" about Central America, criticizing both US support for counterrevolution and the Left's approach to revolutionary activity (p. 71). Navasky then asked for reader comments, and two weeks later published responses to Massing's article. *The Nation's* in-house press critic, Alexander Cockburn, accused Massing of standing "side by side with Reagan" (p. 72). Cockburn's regular *Beat the Press* column was written from a firmly anti-imperialist point of view, and, in Witham's view, gave *The Nation* a radical voice alongside the more dominant strain of liberal anti-interventionism. (In another chapter, he contrasts *The Nation* with the New York-based radical newspaper the *Guardian*, which began life as a progressive organ for Henry Wallace's campaign in 1948 before passing through a more sectarian Marxist-Leninist phase, before adopting a "left

unity" approach by 1979 on the subject of Central America.)

In another example of the contrast he draws between anti-interventionists and anti-imperialists, Witham devotes a chapter to comparing the work of the historians Walter LaFeber (who published his *Inevitable Revolutions* in 1983) and Gabriel Kolko (whose *Confronting the Third World* came out in 1988). Both shared the view that the US government used anticommunism to justify global interventionism. Kolko, as a professor at University of Pennsylvania, had been close to its student activists in the New Left era, whereas LaFeber, at Cornell University, was critical of both the activists and his university's administration. Witham argues that these basic perspectives continued to inform their scholarship: LaFeber thought that the academic's role was to challenge prevailing norms of society while remaining an independent voice, including from radical activism. Kolko, by contrast, believed in full engagement. Kolko accepted the left-wing framework of dependency theory and saw the Nicaraguan revolution as a victory for the Left that proved the structural weakness of American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. LaFeber defended only modified forms of dependency theory, and thought that Central America's revolutions were inevitable, but not necessarily beneficial. He imagined that centrist and democratic revolutions might have chosen to work with the United States.

Though he offers insightful readings of members of both groups, Witham is occasionally harsher on the anti-interventionists than on the anti-imperialists. For example, he criticizes only LaFeber for unrealistic assumptions, writing that LaFeber's contention that Jimmy Carter had failed to "win" the Sandinista revolution for the United States "ignored the fact that ... [the Sandinista insurgency] was so fundamentally anti-Yankee that its agents would have struggled to work closely with an American presidential administration, no matter how benevolent" (p. 40). This is probably

so, although the case of Costa Rica might seem to support LaFeber's general argument, and many aspects of Kolko's dependency theory have also not held up especially well. In another example, Witham notes anti-imperialist Alexander Cockburn's criticism of *New York Times* reporter Stephen Kinzer's stories that the Sandinistas were supplying arms to El Salvador's FMLN—but does not mention that Kinzer was correct.

But in general, Witham's goal is not to favor the cause of the anti-imperialists over the anti-interventionists. Instead, he aims to show that both were important to the solidarity movement. The value of the anti-imperialist cultural products was that they were explicitly geared towards producing content that would be of assistance to activists: here, he cites the cases of Verso Books, the *Guardian*, and the testimonial films *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983) and *María's Story* (1990). On the other hand, anti-interventionist products, like Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), most of *The Nation*, and LaFeber's *Inevitable Revolutions*, could reach a larger audience and served to convince North American viewers to be skeptical of the Ronald Reagan administration's messages and of mainstream media portraits of the nature of the conflict.

Given this structure and scope, the book is likely to be most interesting to scholar-activists, who will find it a thoughtful guide to some of their struggles and dilemmas. Organizers in the antiwar movement against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have faced challenges similar to those of their counterparts in the 1980s—not in this case because of sympathy for the targets of US intervention, but because they share the difficulty of forming an alliance that features both radicals and liberals. Witham's book should be a useful reference for those wanting to think through the costs and benefits of various approaches.

However, the author has made some decisions that are likely to limit the book's usefulness

outside of those circles. Most importantly, the archival work is extremely sparse. A few footnotes point to collections held by the Wisconsin Historical Society, but this is primarily a history of media production that depends on media sources. Claims about the importance and influence of these publications is inference drawn from the fact that they exist. Additionally, the focus here is exclusively on Anglo-American cultural production, even though the solidarity movements they sought to aid were transnational organizations. To better assess their importance, it would have been necessary to cite Spanish-language sources, and to include Central American actors among the book's major characters. US government documents could have shown how the Reagan administration viewed this production, especially because we know that, in general, it tried to undermine and discredit transnational solidarity organizations like CISPES and NicaNet. But despite the promise of the title, this book does not attempt a transnational history of Central American solidarity organizations on the model, perhaps, of James Green's *We Cannot Remain Silent* about Brazil (2010).

A more ambitious research agenda would probably also have allowed Witham to advance more significant claims. His central claim, that there was an oppositional Left during the Reagan presidency, is simultaneously correct and unsurprising. The absence of such a Left in a democracy would be far more stunning than its existence is. His conclusion, pointing to throughlines of cultural radicalism in the New Left of the 60s and 70s, Central American solidarity movements of the 1980s, and today, offers some examples that suggest possibilities for future research: Paul Berman, whose regrets have made a liberal interventionist of an anti-interventionist, and Oliver Stone, whose films are now more anti-imperialist than anti-interventionist. Engagement with US foreign policy and Central American politics was certainly a meaningful and important experience for many activists in the 1980s, and Witham's book reminds us of the internal diversity of those

movements. But assessing what lessons were learned, and perhaps what lessons *should* have been learned based on what we can now use historical methods to uncover, will require a different approach.

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