

Interview

The retreat of the pink tide in Latin America - On the 1998 to today experience

Monday 27 August 2018, by [GASPER Phil](#), [WEBBER Jeffery R.](#) (Date first published: 20 August 2018).

Jeffery R. Webber is senior lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary University of London. He is an editor of *Historical Materialism*, an expert on the politics and political economy of Latin America, and the author of *From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia: Class Struggle, Indigenous Liberation, and the Politics of Evo Morales* (Haymarket, 2011), *Red October: Left-Indigenous Struggles in Modern Bolivia* (Haymarket, 2012), *Blood of Extraction: Canadian Imperialism in Latin America with Todd Gordon* (Fernwood, 2016), and *The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same: The Politics and Economics of the New Latin American Left* (Haymarket, 2017). He spoke with ISO editorial board member Phil Gasper on April 5, the morning after the Brazilian Supreme Court voted to imprison the country's former president, Lula da Silva.

Phil Gasper - Your most recent book was about the rise and retreat of the so-called pink tide in Latin America, I want to start by asking you more about that . It's twenty years now since Hugo Chavez was first elected in Venezuela, and that's often seen as the start of the left-wing revival in Latin America. How should we evaluate the whole experience from 1998 to today? Was it a mirage? Was there really a shift to the left? And why did it seem to retreat so quickly?

Jeffery R. Webber - One way to talk about it is to think about it in phases, so, we can characterize with hindsight the different phases and turning points. Although it's true that Chavez's election in late 1998 and his taking office in February 1999 is looked at by many as the starting point, but to me that's not the starting point because it suggests the dominance of electoral cycles. Really, the dominant feature of the late 1990s and early 2000s was the extra-parliamentary rearticulation of a social left after twenty years of decomposition and assault by neoliberalism. This had to do with a very steep neoliberal recession between 1998 and 2002 throughout South America—four years of negative growth rates, rising inequality, poverty, and unemployment, after already twenty years of social degradation from neoliberal restructuring. That moment was important because throughout the region, and in particular South America (Central America and Mexico had different dynamics), the center-right or the right was in office almost everywhere. So they were held to be responsible for this crisis. But the left, because of years of decomposition, had no political party formations of any serious kind apart from the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil and a few small exceptions. Most center-left parties had joined the neoliberal trend.

So the first explosion, the first phase of the left, was predominantly extra-parliamentary: the unemployed workers' movement in Argentina during the financial crisis in that country, the left

indigenous revolts in Bolivia and Ecuador, the landless movement in Brazil, etc. That's the wider context in which Chavez's election took place. But the real electoral expression of the left elsewhere, outside of Venezuela, doesn't begin until the second phase in the mid-2000s. So the first phase is one of extraordinary extra-parliamentary militancy, a growing sense of anticapitalism among some layers of the left. I don't want to exaggerate—much of it was antineoliberal. But there were some considerable layers of anticapitalism, particularly in the most militant countries, Bolivia being the leading edge of this.

In the second phase, however, you start to see the first decisive contradictions of this turn. Beginning with the election of Lula [in Brazil] and then proceeding with elections throughout South America between 2003 and 2008, the entire electoral landscape shifts. So mid-1990s, all center-right and right. Mid-2000s, virtually the entirety of South America is left or center-left, with the exceptions of Colombia, Chile, and Peru, which are important exceptions but, nonetheless, most of the rest of the sub-region had shifted. Now this shift to electoral politics meant a shift in the temporalities and rhythm of struggle toward winning elections and a moderation of many of the demands that had been coming from below. But this also corresponded with a renewal of capitalist dynamism in the region, which is very important; so the elections did not occur during the deep recession a few years earlier but rather during the period of renewed capitalist dynamism, driven by the industrialization of China that was driving up prices on minerals, natural gas, oil, and agro-industrial commodities like soya, etc. Now what this allowed center-left and left governments to do was to delay a certain set of class questions. What I mean by that is that governments were able to meet many of the basic demands of their social base, and blunting the extra-parliamentary discontent with neoliberalism, by injecting far more revenue into cash-transfer programs. In addition to the improvement of employment levels, because now there was capitalist growth, there was an improvement in livelihoods and a reduction of poverty. This was also true in right-wing countries like Colombia and Peru. It would have been an achievement not to reduce poverty during the commodities boom, but there was more improvement by left-wing governments. They were able to do this in the context of the commodity boom with only slight adjustments in royalty and tax regimes in the extractive sectors of their economies without confronting capital in a serious way. So all the multinational corporations that were involved in the natural gas sector in Bolivia, for example, were still there at the end of the Morales government that were there in the beginning. None of them left. We know the only reason they exist is to pursue profits, and when you look at the trends over this period you have a net gain in profits compared to the 1990s.

So during the commodities boom, left governments, without confronting the size of the portion of GDP going to capital, were able, nonetheless, to seize, through modest royalty and tax increases, huge increases in their state revenue and to transfer part of this into very popular antipoverty programs. This fueled legitimacy for what some called compensatory states—compensating their social bases while not confronting capital or changing any kind of social property relations in the country. Obviously there are many differences between countries, but that's the general trend. But this "mutually" beneficial relationship between capital and labor was contingent on high commodity prices. When the global crisis hits in 2008, it is not an instantaneous crisis in Latin America. It is in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, because they are deeply imbricated in the American market—it's their principal export market, and their principal source of foreign exchange in remittances from undocumented and documented labor in the US. But in South America you did not see an immediate recession because over the course of the early 2000s there was a shift in trade relations overwhelmingly toward East Asia and not toward the American market. China, through its own extraordinary countercyclical spending programs on infrastructure and so on, tried to delay the crisis there. That worked for roughly three years with lower but still very significant growth in China. That starts to slow down in 2011 and every year thereafter. China has the lowest growth since 1990; and for every percentage point drop in China GDP it's a significant GDP drop in South

America because of the commodities slowdown. So in 2012 a recession begins almost everywhere in South America—first with the declining prices of agro-industrial commodities and mined minerals, and then the collapse of oil prices in 2014, which sends Venezuela into an extraordinary crisis. The crisis in Venezuela precedes the oil price drop and is clearly not reducible to the question of oil prices, but all the same, the latter has a significant impact on the Venezuelan economy.

This is the third phase I'm talking about—the delayed reverberation of the global crisis into Latin America. It really begins in 2012 and persists into the present. The ability to avoid certain class questions that governments had at the beginning of the cycle was no longer a possibility. With the austere situation of state revenue, regimes had to decide which parts of the society would pay. Would it be capital, through a modest increase in taxes? Capital-gains taxes, which are virtually nonexistent in these countries, or an increase in taxes on the extractive sectors could have been levied, or more radically appropriation—socialization of some of these sectors of the economy. That would have been one way to sustain some of the popular programs even in the situation of lowering dynamic growth. What actually happened was a decision by left governments to transfer the cost onto their social bases, betting on the idea that these social bases would be guaranteed. There was no opposition on their left flank of any serious import, so they thought the social base would continue to elect them, while they tried to remain credible to financial capital and to capital in general, and so there are various signals of this. One key signal, for example, was Dilma Rousseff's second term in 2014 in Brazil, where she ran on an anti-neoliberal ticket after the June 2013 protests against the PT, which began as left-wing protests against increases in public transport tariffs. So she runs to the left—much further left than her first program. But as soon as she's in office there's a dramatic reversal. The first thing she does is select as finance minister Joaquim Levy, a neoclassical economist who had been president of Bradesco Asset Management, a division of the second biggest private bank in Brazil, Bradesco.

In Brazil and elsewhere this wager diminished the social base of the left governments. The bases, in fact, did not continue to support these governments as expected; and at the same time, these governments also lost the confidence of capital. As long as net profits were increasing, fine. But during a drop in profitability and increasing political instability, capitalists returned to their natural home of old or new-right configurations. So left and center-left governments were left in this vacuum – a weaker popular base and diminished credibility from capital. In these new conditions right-wing formations began to emerge.

The final point I'll make on this question concerns why the pink tide disappeared so quickly. Part of this has to do, I think, with what Gramsci might call a kind of molecular process of incorporation into the state apparatus of independent social movements, trade unions, and so on, over the course of that electoral period of capitalist dynamism between 2003 and 2011. A decapitation of independent militant movements and class-based organizations occurred as leaders were increasingly absorbed into the state apparatus and became institutionalized by that apparatus. So you see, for instance, a drop in all strike figures, a drop in all movement activity over this period, and so an ability to struggle independently for class aims, regardless of the political hue of the government, was diminished. You only really saw a kind of renewal of autonomous activity in opposition to these governments of working-class and popular-class aims independent of the government as the economic recession begins to kick in in 2012, when left governments start to introduce austerity programs. But the Right was able to seize on that moment much more rapidly than the Left because the social left was completely disoriented, having basically tightened its relations to the state in this period. So that's why I think it seems to disappear completely. But it has totally disappeared. On the electoral level this is true, but there is still some dynamism socially.

Can you say more about Brazil? Dilma was removed from office in what many people call a constitutional coup in 2016. The new right-wing administration is extremely unpopular,

and Lula is trying to make a comeback but has been convicted of corruption charges in the courts . How have things played out there, and what are the prospects in the immediate future for Brazil?

Brazil is in a very frightening situation. Dilma's impeachment was based on a totally trivial—not even illegal much less unconstitutional—accounting measure that is practiced by all kinds of governments in Latin America and elsewhere. It's a practice advised by the IMF—it has to do with when you release money to public banks. It's an accounting measure which every government in Brazil has used before. So we can talk about real corruption in the PT during its rule, which is true, but this was a totally bogus impeachment. So, an extra-constitutional impeachment overthrew this rightward-moving center-left administration that was desperately trying to win over the capitalists' favor. Even when she was being impeached, the bankruptcy of the PT was made clear by the fact that she didn't want to be associated with street protests that were trying to keep her in office. She preferred, together with Lula, to try to negotiate a deal behind the scenes that would restore her to office. So there's no trust or faith or even a sense of association with the base whatsoever, although there is going the other way. There were very serious mass protests to try to stop the anti-constitutional coup even among the sections of the left who have no love for the PT. What Brazil indicates is that where the Right is unable to win elections, it can now conduct extra-constitutional coups. And not just parliamentary coups; there was a military coup in Honduras in 2009, so that is also a possibility.

In the subsequent period, Michel Temer, an unelected totally corrupt representative of a center-right party in Brazil, assumes office and rather than holding elections immediately carries out Dilma's entire term. His popularity rates are the lowest in Brazil's history. This is quite interesting: although the PT was seen as massively corrupt and Dilma's popularity was very low, this does not mean that the right has some kind of new hegemonic project to easily fill this vacuum. The fact that Temer was its candidate and immediately went down to 7 percent popularity—it's now somewhere like 2 or 3 percent—is suggestive of how bankrupt the right's project is. But the right has the ability to use both the sympathetic institutional apparatuses in the existing capitalist state and to use coercion and the prospect of military interventions in a way that the left can't.

The latest iteration of this phase has to do with the forthcoming election in Brazil, in which Lula is reintroduced as the PT candidate for president knowing that he will become a target of the lava jato ("car wash") anticorruption campaign, which was part of the process through which Dilma was impeached. But the "car wash" investigation that has plenty of candidates they could have focused on, focuses on Lula because he remains very popular, despite the fact the PT wasn't popular. The investigation targets Lula and claims that he accepted a \$600,000 beachside apartment as a bribe—together with some other minor benefits—from some construction firms in an agreement through which these firms would win contracts with Petrobras, the state-owned oil enterprise in Brazil. The only evidence that this bribe took place is the testimony of a confessed criminal through a plea bargain. There's no corroborating evidence for this. It is true that Lula's wife visited this apartment on several occasions. Lula also admits to considering buying this apartment, but he never lived there, and he denies any association with this apartment. This is not to say the PT was not involved in systemic corruption in the Gramscian sense—as a form of statecraft in which every ruling party in Brazil in recent history has engaged. (Benjamin Fogel is presently elaborating on this idea in his doctoral dissertation in history at New York University.) That is to say, the PT never had a congressional majority during this entire period. And given the fragmentation of the party system structure it entered into the traditional arrangements of paying and bribing competing parties through monthly dividends. Again, a very traditional practice, which is not to justify it whatsoever, but this is a completely normal form of statecraft in the Brazilian dynamic, which suggests how little a departure the PT was from traditional capitalist rule in Brazil.

Returning to the charges against Lula: he was convicted, but the PT still held on to him as a candidate, and there were three appeal processes that he could pursue. Just by the fact he had been convicted, he was facing twelve years in prison. These appeal processes should have extended virtually to the elections—this is what he was counting on—but last night [April 4] a majority of the eleven members of the Supreme Court ruled that Lula has to go to jail during the election period. He can still go through the appeal processes but has to be imprisoned in the meantime. So we are in a new situation. This suggests something about the Brazilian state that the court has done that at this time.

It should be obvious that this is a political move but in case it's not, a good comparison is with a senator on the right, Aécio Neves, who was caught on a recording asking for a bribe of \$600,000 from a meatpacking conglomerate in exchange for various state contracts, etc. Also caught on tape was the receipt of that bribe by his son. There is little harder evidence that you could imagine. As a senator he cannot be tried in the lower-ranking courts of Brazil, but the Supreme Court has the power to judge him. He is freely operating as a senator, while Lula sits in jail based on the plea-bargain testimony of a criminal. There are other examples but these are two stark contrasting cases of what is going on there.

As of yesterday, Lula was leading the polls at 34 percent—more than double the next candidate in the presidential race. There is no other candidate of the PT of his stature whatsoever and the party itself is not very popular. Even if Lula appoints someone, it's unlikely that the candidate would have the same kind of allure. This leaves open the possibility of the extreme-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro winning the presidency, which was obviously well known by the people who orchestrated Lula's imprisonment. This person openly avows the military dictatorship period and celebrates the fact that Dilma Rousseff was tortured during her opposition to the dictatorship. And before the Supreme Court made its decision, another thing to think about is the dynamic of several high-ranking officials in the Brazilian military threatening a coup if Lula wasn't sent to jail. So even if the Supreme Court hadn't been inclined on its own to do this, there was pressure from other apparatuses of the Brazilian state. This is happening at the same time the Rio de Janeiro police force has been removed and the military is now policing the favelas, carrying out assassinations of primarily Afro-Brazilians, who already suffer an extraordinary rate of police abuse. And two weeks ago the socialist representative [Marielle Franco] in Rio was assassinated. So very frightening dynamics in Brazil; very unclear what's going to happen in the elections.

Can you also talk a little bit about Bolivia, one of the places where the pink tide seems to have had more staying power. Is that true? Has the right been defeated in Bolivia or is the general picture you've been talking about applicable there as well?

Bolivia is an interesting case because Evo Morales, although his popularity is decreasing, nonetheless remains the most popular politician in the country. In the 2014 elections he won 64 percent of the vote, quite extraordinary, not least because he had already gone through many years in office; by historical standards it's totally unheard of in the democratic period. His popularity now is lower than it was in 2014. One proxy of this in February 2016 was a referendum on changing the constitution to allow for his reelection as president because he had reached his term limit according to the Bolivian constitution. That election, although it was formally about an amendment to the constitution, was fought as a yes or no for Morales. It was very narrowly defeated, 51 percent I believe, and so he should not be able to run in the next election. After that defeat, Morales and his vice president decided he should run anyway. So they appealed to the Constitutional Tribunal, which unlike the Supreme Court in Brazil, is aligned with MAS [the Movement for Socialism, Morales' political party], and not an oppositional institutional part of the state. Despite the obvious non-constitutionality of his running again, the Tribunal ruled that he be allowed to run again. This ruling is rightly criticized by the independent left in Bolivia, but there are two things to say about this: The

first is that the international media's characterization is extraordinarily hypocritical. If you compare this with the international media reaction to Angela Merkel's reelection to her fourth term in Germany, which was celebrated by every bourgeois media outlet in the world. Compare this to the very idea of an indefinite reelection in Bolivia or Venezuela and the hysteria is palpable.

Morales is likely to win the next election, but there is a worrying trend, and this comes back to a characterization of the new dynamics of the right, which is not just happening in Bolivia. Because the right sees that it is not going to win—already it's clear, barring some kind of extraordinary development—the right, which is divided and bankrupt, and using the same leaders who have failed consistently to win previous elections, is using this constitutional move by Morales to talk about Bolivia as a dictatorship, Bolivia as being a totalitarian regime, and so on. The right says, "We're not going to run in the election, you can't count on the outcome of the 2019 elections."

This is happening at the same time that in Venezuela a significant part of the right is boycotting the elections, even though polls suggest that if they united they would win. What this allows then is the possibility of very frightening developments: military coups, or a US invasion is not off the cards, particularly in Venezuela. We saw this when [then US Secretary of State Rex] Tillerson's trip to Brazil and Colombia [in February 2018], saw the mobilization of Brazilian and Colombian troops to the border with Venezuela, under the guise of addressing the "humanitarian crisis" of populations leaving Venezuela. Obviously, it's difficult to know with Trump's perpetual verbiage and insane rhetoric what is real, but I think you have to take seriously the fact that this plays into the dynamic of the right's not accepting electoral outcomes when they are going to lose, or even when they might win but it's not obvious that they will, setting the pretext for intervention in different ways.

So in Bolivia this is the immediate dynamic. But this doesn't mean necessarily the survival of the left because what Morales has become is basically a very adept state manager of Bolivian capitalism with budget surpluses throughout, very low inflation, and some heterodox economic policies, such as the countercyclical spending cycle drawing on the extraordinary foreign reserves that were accumulated during the commodities boom. But generally, very orthodox economics. Bolivia, for complicated reasons, has been relatively mildly affected by the global crisis mainly because of sustained demand for natural gas from Brazil and Argentina, which are its principal export markets. So right now Bolivia, unlike Brazil or Venezuela, is not in a recession. It's part of the reason why it's relatively stable. But significant layers of the social base of Morales have, nonetheless, distanced themselves from his administration and are articulating new, albeit incipient, left milieus—you couldn't really call them organizations, much less parties, but there is a popular sentiment of the necessity of building an actual independent left. So that means when we think about the reproduction of the left, we should not reduce this to whether these governments have managed to stay in office because sometimes that is insufficient to reproduce the left, in the sense that if they are simply going to carry out austerity programs there comes a limit to when you can refer to these as properly left governments.

You mentioned the threat of US intervention in the region . One of the explanations for the rise of the center-left governments a decade ago was that the United States was so embroiled in the Middle East and Afghanistan it wasn't able to intervene in Latin America during that period, and that opened the door for the pink tide governments and also for growing Chinese influence in Latin America. Is that a plausible account for what happened? And does the United States now have a different strategy with respect to Latin America?

I think that description, of a relative autonomy from US imperialism fits, but for different reasons. I would not argue that this is the reason why there was a turn to the left; I think this has much more to do with domestic dynamics in Latin America. But the trajectory of those processes was certainly

given more room for maneuver because of US imperial overextension in the Middle East. I think that's true, but it's not the cause of the left ascendancy. What are the indications of this? That the US failed to intervene militarily in Latin America in confronting regimes which it did not like, particularly Chavez and in certain periods Correa in Ecuador, and Morales in Bolivia, is because the United States for several decades—in fact throughout the Cold War—very rarely intervened overtly in Latin America. The option was always through a series of proxy interventions, so proxy wars, the use of client parties where there is the necessity of opposition, or client states in suppressing left-wing oppositions, was the method of intervention. There's a very long and sordid history of that, and it continued throughout this pink-tide period, by funneling money through the National Endowment for Democracy to the Venezuelan opposition, by lending support to the Venezuelan coup attempt in 2002, by supporting destabilization campaigns in Bolivia, and on and on.

And the key area of intervention, which has accelerated in the recent period, is in the so-called drug war in what some call the greater Central American corridor. Under the pretext of fighting drugs there has been extraordinary support for the militarization of these societies, or the paramilitarization of these societies by US foreign policy. So the US hasn't totally retreated; it's a more complicated picture than that, but it is true that its primary concern was not Latin America. And Latin America is still not the primary concern given the avowed pivot to Asia and relations with China. Nonetheless, Latin America because of its proximity and history has always and will always play an important role as long as the US is in a dominant position.

That's just the military dynamic.

Economically you see more interesting developments and actual change in US imperial power. One indication of this is that in the 1980s and '90s the World Bank and International Monetary Fund together with the InterAmerican Development Bank were the key channels through which, apart from just general foreign direct investment of American capital, the US operated in terms of setting conditions for structural adjustment, restructuring of economies to open them up for foreign capital, and so on, through conditional loans, these kinds of things. These institutions were extraordinarily powerful in the 1980s and '90s in Latin America. They almost disappear in the 2000s. This has to do with the opening up of alternative lines of credit, both through the oil wealth that Venezuela was accumulating, and agreements through the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), Petrocaribe [\[1\]](#), and loans coming from China. So this is a new development giving relative autonomy to Latin America and the new regional arrangements with ALBA and CELAC (the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), and UNASUR (the Union of South American Nations), which explicitly sought to replace the dynamics of the Organization of American States (OAS) that was dominated by the United States, by excluding from these institutions the United States and Canada, and by including Cuba in these dynamics. This basically pushed the OAS aside, which was always seen, correctly, as an extension of the US state in the region. So relative autonomy was achieved to a certain degree and in particular areas vis-a-vis the United States, particularly in terms of economics, but also in terms of geopolitics and diplomacy.

So where does China fit into this? We need to start by saying that there's no evidence of China representing a kind of military rival to the United States in Latin America. Some people exaggerate that dynamic. But this is not the only form that imperialism assumes, and China is very much a player through its economic mechanisms of imperialism. But again, we should think about dynamics and tendencies rather than exaggerate where we are. It is very difficult to measure Chinese foreign direct investment into Latin America because much of it is disguised, vis-à-vis loans, and aid, so it doesn't show up in the indicators. But with this caveat, the official data says that between 2005 and 2013, China represented only 5 percent of foreign direct investment coming into Latin America. That figure spiked last year—the latest figures show 15 percent. If you include mergers and acquisitions, which are not always included in foreign investment data, China rises to the fourth highest imperial

player in this zone, if you include the EU as a bloc rather than dividing it up. So the US is still leading, the EU in second position, then Canada, which is often forgotten in this picture but which is massively important in mining and finance; then comes China. However, China has more momentum than any of these other players, which is crucially important. Also, the EU's figures are difficult and need to be disaggregated because, until recently, Spain was leading, but Spain fell into crisis and lost many of its investments. Below Spain was the Netherlands, but because the Netherlands promotes itself as a financial haven, much of this is not actually Dutch capital, and it's not clear where this capital is from. It's thirdparty capital that goes through the Netherlands and is then registered as Dutch foreign direct investment, but it's quite obvious it's not principally Dutch foreign direct investment, nor even necessarily European investment.

So the figures are complicated, but we can say with confidence the major players are the EU, China, Canada, and the US, and the US is still leading by quite some distance. However, if you think about how rapidly China's extension of power into the region is growing, this becomes more interesting. For example, if you look at projections of expected investments and so on, not investments that have actually happened but deals that have been made and that are expected to be realized, China's pattern of investment and trade is expected to accelerate more rapidly than any other player in the near future. And when you look at Chinese loans, then China's power economically becomes, even in the immediate sense, more important than FDI alone would suggest. There are plausible estimates of the aggregate loans by the UN and ECLAC—official sources that aren't likely to exaggerate—that Chinese development bank loans outpaced loans from the World Bank, the IMF, and the Inter-American Development Bank over this entire period, which is totally unique in recent history. These loans are for oil, for natural gas, and other similar raw material agreements as well as infrastructure investment. So some repayments will be in kind. Venezuela is literally paying back loans by shipping oil directly to China, guaranteeing a source of energy for the Asian power into the future. Chinese firms are investing in all these areas increasingly, and they have projections of investing further. But even in the immediate instance, what are being counted as loans should not be considered loans or aid, but classical imperial moves that are channeled back through Chinese development banks into Chinese enterprises. Because there are guarantees written into the loans of these infrastructure projects, concessions are being given to Chinese state enterprises doing the construction, so the money goes through the development bank not to Ecuador or Venezuela or Bolivia, but is immediately cycled back into Chinese enterprises. This not registered as FDI. So looking as these figures, to make a long story short, China is a bigger player than it would immediately appear, but not on the military front.

What about resistance? There's been a retreat and the working class is under attack, particularly in Brazil and Argentina from the rightwing governments there. What are the prospects for rebuilding working-class resistance, or where do you see social forces that can take the initiative for the left and push back?

I think there are two sides to this story. One is, at least on the surface, more optimistic and one more pessimistic, and we need to think about both of these at the same time. The optimistic side of this scenario is that many of the real gains that were achieved over the period of the commodities boom and the period of center-left movements—not achieved through the benevolence of these governments but by the movements pushing them—are not going to be casually given up by the social sectors that achieved them. So when the right assumes office as it has in Brazil, Argentina, and elsewhere, the immediate reaction has been, for example in Brazil, the first general strike in twenty-one years—an extraordinary mobilization against these attacks. In Argentina, a whole series of extremely militant strikes and actions have been taking place over the last two years against Mauricio Macri. So this is the positive side—a renewal of independent class activity and unity against an easily hated enemy in which the complications of associating with a more sympathetic

government are removed. All of the left can hate Michel Temer in Brazil; all of the left can hate Macri. Whatever other sectional divisions on the left, there's no debate over that. So Peronists are together with anticapitalist forces in the streets and in the unions. I mean, they are fighting each other intensely, but they are nonetheless capable of acting at the same time as a united force under these conditions.

But we should not exaggerate what this resistance is accomplishing. Just because there is activity does not mean workers are winning. Most of the "reforms" are still going through, and these are defensive struggles. The difficulty of the current moment is two-fold: On the one hand, it's coming to terms ideologically on the left of assessing the degree to which the project of the center-left failed, it's coming to terms with just how big a defeat this has been. Because if that's not done, then the temporality of electoral cycles reintroduces these already-existing apparatuses like the PT, like the Peronists in Argentina, as the most plausible defense against the right-wing offensive. If there is not a serious assessment of the role of these center-left parties in the crisis we are presently going through in the region, and why there is the necessity of building an independent left outside of them, which is not going to happen before the next electoral cycle in virtually any country we are talking about, then the problem will be repeated. This doesn't mean the left can't participate in elections, as the recent anticapitalist coalition in Argentina shows. You can participate, but there's no sense in which you are going to win these elections. The real question is a medium to longer-term project of rebuilding a left. This is not going to happen in electoral cycles. Therefore, one needs to think about how to navigate a terrain in which the pressures of electoral cycles are happening in electoral temporalities, but the realistic possibilities of building an independent anticapitalist left are only on the medium and long-term horizon. Meanwhile the right is on the offensive. However, the right, once it is in office, has no solution for the crisis it has inherited. There is no renewal of dynamism in the international world market, not in the Eurozone, not in the United States, and China is reducing growth. The possibility of a renewal of the 2008 crisis is in the near future if you accept the analyses of economists like Michael Roberts. So there's no easy out for the right either. So we're at an impasse with the right because of its unpopularity, and the left because of its fragmentation, are unable to rule in a hegemonic way. However, the right has the resources under these conditions to rule while being unpopular through military coercive force, often under the guise of democratic means and constitutionality, but with increasing coercion, and we are seeing this throughout Latin America.

Final question. What journals and writers would you recommend people pay attention to for left-wing analyses for what's going on in Latin America and to understand these developments you've outlined?

The best sources are of course in Spanish and Portuguese; that's where I get most of my information. In Mexico the best independent magazine is *Memorial* [2] edited by Massimo Modonessi, and he, in my view, is the best analyst of contemporary Mexican political dynamics, as well as an insightful thinker on the region as a whole. In Argentina, *Herramienta* [3] is the most important journal available online. *Rebelión* [4], a website based in Spain, but which is about Latin America and has an international editorial board, is the best single analytical news source and quite representative of revolutionary pluralism. With various currents represented on this website you can get a real sense of the debates happening on the far left with good coverage of most countries and sub-regions. There is a mix of mainly sympathetic left-wing journalism—sympathetic to center left and left regimes—in *La Jornada*, a Mexican daily, especially the world section, available online. [5] Its opinion pieces are less reliable, but some of these can be excellent – particularly those of Guillermo Almeyra.

In terms of individuals, Edgardo Lander [6] is very interesting on Venezuela, as is Gonzalo Gómez of *Marea Socialista*. [7] Franck Gaudichaud, [8] a writer based in France but who writes frequently in

Spanish and is most familiar with Chile, is one of the best observers of contemporary social movements in the region. Claudio Katz, [9] based in Argentina, is often excellent. In Bolivia, the economists at CEDLA [10] are exceptionally rigorous in painting a picture of the labor market and labor struggles in Bolivia, while sociologists at Fundación Tierra [11] and CEDIB [12] provide a picture of agrarian reform and agrarian struggles and the extractive sectors, respectively. Ruy Braga, [13] Sean Purdy, [14] and Ricardo Antunes [15] in Brazil are interesting writers on dynamics in that country. Alejandra Santillana Ortíz, [16] Pablo Opsina, [17] and Mario Unda [18] are writers to read on Ecuador.

In English there are fewer reliable sources from a serious anticapitalist perspective. From a broad-left perspective, NACLA Report on the Americas [19] has useful information and sometimes good reportage on the left, but not necessarily anticapitalist. Upside Down World [20] is attempting a renewal. It used to be very important and then it drifted away. It focuses on social movements in Latin America with a horizontalist, autonomous orientation. And if you approach it very critically you can sometimes learn facts from Telesur in English, [21] although it does not allow for serious criticism of Venezuela, Ecuador, or its aligned states. But it does occasionally have good reportage of enemy administrations, such as those in Argentina and Brazil—a mixed source. Those are places to start. For a wider background reading list of titles in English on the region, you can consult a reading guide I developed originally for the French journal *Période*, which is now also available in English on the Historical Materialism website. [22]

Jeffery R. Webber interviewed by Phil Gasper

P.S.

- ISR, Issue #110: Interviews - Fall 2018:
<https://isreview.org/issue/110/retreat-pink-tide-latin-america>
-

Footnotes

[1] An alliance between Venezuela and various Caribbean countries allowing the latter to buy oil on preferential terms.

[2] <http://revistamemoria.mx/>

[3] <http://www.herramienta.com.ar/>

[4] <https://rebellion.org/>

[5] <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/>

[6] <https://www.tni.org/en/profile/edgardo-lander>
Available from Edgardo Lander on ESSF: [LANDER Edgardo](#).

[7] <http://mareasocialista.com.ve/>
Available from Gonzalo Gómez on ESSF: [GÓMEZ Gonzalo](#).

[8] Available from Frank Gaudichaud on ESSF: [GAUDICHAUD Frank](#).

[9] <http://katz.lahaine.org/>

Available from Claudio Katz on ESSF: [KATZ Claudio](#).

[10] <http://cedla.org/>

[11] <http://www.ftierra.org/>

[12] <https://cedib.org/>

[13] <http://sociologia.fflch.usp.br/docentes/ruybraga>

[14] <http://historia.fflch.usp.br/docentes/robertsean>

[15] <http://www.herramienta.com.ar/autores/antunes-ricardo>

[16] <http://www.iee.org.ec/articulos-generales/iee.html>

[17] <http://nuso.org/autor/pablo-ospina-peralta/>

[18] https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Mario_Unda

[19] <https://nacla.org/magazine>

[20] <http://upsidedownworld.org/>

[21] <https://telesurtv.net/english/index.html>

[22] <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/reading-guides/marxism-and-latin-america-jeffery-r-webber>