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On: 04 April 2014, At: 12:20

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgld20>

Rethinking Latin America: development, hegemony, and social transformation

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Published online: 02 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: William I. Robinson (2014): Rethinking Latin America: development, hegemony, and social transformation, *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, DOI: [10.1080/23269995.2014.903739](https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.903739)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.903739>

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BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM: *RETHINKING LATIN AMERICA: DEVELOPMENT, HEGEMONY, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION*, BY RONALDO MUNCK

Rethinking Latin America: development, hegemony, and social transformation, by Ronaldo Munck, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 264 pp., £55.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781137004116

Toward a 21st century reading of Latin America: a sympathetic critique of Ronaldo Munck's *Rethinking Latin America: development, hegemony, and social transformation*

William I. Robinson

I have been following over the past three decades and have deeply appreciated Ronaldo Munck's contributions on Latin American politics and development, globalization, social movements, and labor in the world economy. The particular talent that Munck brings to his work – and what makes it so refreshing – is his ability to identify sweeping trends and historical shifts underway and to synthesize a broad range of literatures with his own analytical and theoretical insights. *Rethinking Latin America* is certainly no exception to this approach; yet, it is perhaps his most ambitious work to date in terms of historical synthesis. In it, he proposes a fresh interpretation of five centuries of development and social change in Latin America and five decades of academic and political debate on the region in light of its increasing importance in the global system. Grounded ultimately in an unorthodox Marxist critique of capitalism, Munck frames this synthesis within the concepts and categories of Antonio Gramsci and his Andean counterpart, Jose Mariategui, although he also draws eclectically from a wide range of thinkers, among them, Michel Foucault and Karl Polanyi. The following is a sympathetic reading of his latest work along with several critical observations as to what I see as shortcomings as well as points of disagreement.

Munck lays out what he calls a 'transformationalist approach' to Latin American, based on his three 'framing concepts' for recasting the five century history of the region and its ongoing relationship to the world capitalist system: *development, hegemony, and social transformation*. With regard to the first of these, Munck reviews modernization theory, dependency theory in its various forms, neoliberal and post-modern/post-colonial critiques, eventually leaning towards a sympathetic reading of dependency theory yet qualified in light of more recent globalizing processes, including the impossibility of autarky or withdrawal from the system, so that capitalist development and its prospects must be analyzed 'in endogenous terms – that is to say in terms of its own dynamic – rather than as a perpetually exogenous, or external, phenomenon such as a "global system" somehow constraining national development' (3). He then argues for a return to a Marxist understanding of capitalism, in which 'there is only one capitalist mode of production' that rules out the search for an 'underdeveloped capitalism.'

Hegemony for Munck serves as the overarching political theme for his study, ‘lying between the domains of economic development and social transformation’ (4). For Munck, much of Latin America’s history can be seen as a struggle among dominant classes to establish an always incomplete and tenuous hegemony, ruptured time and again by the subaltern who themselves have searched for viable counter-hegemonic projects. Munck draws liberally – and deftly – on Gramscian concepts of the extended state, passive revolution, *transformismo*, organic crisis, historic bloc, and especially the *national popular*, to suggest that one of the defining features of the continent’s history has been the construction of alternative conceptions, from below and from above, of the national popular as hegemony is disputed and as distinct historic blocs emerge and disintegrate. Mariategui (the ‘Latin American Gramsci’) figures most prominently in Munck’s discussion of the forging of the national popular, as well as in his discussion of the prospects for a counter-hegemonic development inspired by Mariategui’s notion of Amerindian communism based on reciprocity, communal power, and redistribution.

As regards social transformation, Munck is concerned with ongoing changes in the composition of social forces and relations as they have evolved over the centuries and in recent decades through struggles around development and hegemony. The social transformation perspective, argues Munck, has at its core ‘an emphasis on not only the reproduction but also the contestation of the social relations of production...It could be called a radical democratic perspective open to a socialist outcome’ (5). Here, there have been tensions between the simplified choices of reform or revolution, as well as the reduction in the broad social, popular, and ethnic forces to ‘class essentialism’ in analysis and reconstruction of Latin America’s historic experience and current emancipatory potentials. In drawing on Gramsci to make sense out of ongoing processes of social transformation in Latin America, Munck observes that Gramscian concepts and historical writings are useful for Latin America because Gramsci focused on the ‘typical peripheral states’ of Italy, Poland, Spain, and Portugal in Europe that most resemble Latin American states in terms of the incomplete development of the bourgeoisie and the state, the fragile nature of dominant class hegemony, and their semi-peripheral status in the world capitalist system.

Munck lays out these very broad interpretations in seven chapters that take us through the conquest, the colonial period, early modernization and external integration of the post-independence period, import-substitution industrialization (ISI) of the early twentieth century, the ‘hegemonic struggles’ of the mid-twentieth century, the era of neoliberalism (‘market hegemony’), and ‘social countermovement’ or contestation from below of these past twenty years of post-Washington consensus. This is accomplished through an extensive review and assessment of the recent social science literature on the region. He concludes by assessing the various social forces and projects that may shape Latin America in the coming years. The result of all this is a refreshing Gramscian reading of Latin American historiography and society that makes a significant contribution to the contemporary literature and debates on the region’s development and its relationship to the world capitalist system.

If Munck’s ability to present us with a sweeping overview and synthesis is in my view one of his key strengths, it also leaves his work open to criticism of overgeneralization and simplification, along with a tendency to give what seems as approval – or at least of equal importance – to multiple interpretations as put forward in the literature he discusses that are often in contradiction with one another. Indeed, if I have little to criticize it is in large part because I find myself in agreement with much of what he has to say, but also in part because many of his claims and interpretations are so general and sweeping, and his

own political positions vis-a-vis extant literatures appear as too noncommittal. In the limited space allotted for this review, I put forward here three critical observations.

First, Munck, himself Argentine by birth, over-generalizes from the experience of Latin America's three largest economies – Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil – and at that, from the Southern Cone in particular. He makes insufficient reference to the distinct historical experience of the Andean region, and even more so, Central America and the Caribbean; yet, the reasons for these distinctions are never explained in terms of the same historical categories that inform the overall synthesis. Certainly, by way of example, the existence of a large and readily exploitable Amerindian labor force at the time of conquest in the Andean region and Central America – a labor force that was not available in Brazil, Argentina, or Chile – accounts in large part for the development of distinct social relations of production during the colonial and early independence period, which in turn goes a long way in explaining divergent development paths, political trajectories, and state forms (Mexico breaks off from these paths in the wake of the 1910 revolution). Neither can the particular Southern Cone experience of the late twentieth century cycle of military take-overs followed by 'redemocratization' and then globalization be generalized to Latin America as a whole, nor are these processes explained to satisfaction.

Second, Munck puts forth the standard 'breakdown of democracy'/'redemocratization' account that I have criticized elsewhere (in particular, in *Promoting Polyarchy*). In this account, the militaries took over in the face of social contradictions of ISI and went on to impose neoliberal restructuring by force. For its part, the Left learned the lesson of the importance of 'democracy' (Munck never specifies what he means by 'democracy' although it would seem to be the existence of electoral processes and civilian regimes, that is, polyarchy.) In my own view, the breakdown of consensual domination in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the emergence in the centers of world capitalism of transnational capital and the profound restructuring of world capitalism in tandem with the rise of new transnationally oriented fractions of the bourgeoisie in Latin America whose class interests were met neither by the development of internal markets and ISI nor by socialist-oriented experiments. The military regimes undertook the destruction of popular and working classes as constituted subjects as it oversaw a coercive integration into emergent globalized capitalism, an integration which fragmented the working and popular classes and shifted correlations of social and political forces towards the emergent transnational elite.

The violent restructuring of Latin America's political economy and the new forms of economic compulsion imposed by the structural power of transnational capital as internalized in the Latin American states then made unnecessary the continuation of direct coercive mechanisms of social control. A more purely economic compulsion by the structural power of transnational capital, and especially transnational finance capital, made it 'safe' to return to civilian rule (which should not be conflated, as Munck does, with 'democracy'). 'Transitions to democracy' were transitions from coercive to consensual mechanisms of domination and social control. Neoliberalism and polyarchy became the twin mechanisms for the new globalized social order in Latin America: the one intended to make the region available to transnational capital and the other intended to make it safe for transnational capital through a more durable form of hegemonic domination. This is precisely a more rigorous Gramscian analysis of 'redemocratization.' I do not think Munck would be in fundamental disagreement, yet his study evades these subtleties. It seems to me to be politically timid, lacking analysis of the transnational class relations of transitions from consensual to coercive and back to hegemonic modalities of domination in the structural context of capitalist globalization.

This leads to my third concern: the political economy of globalization is not given sufficient attention. How has the region's political economy been transformed by capitalist globalization? Peasant agriculture has given way, in large part, to a new transnational agribusiness and agro-industrial complexes. Industrialization aimed at internal markets has given way to export-oriented industrialization. There is a new extractivism as the plunder of natural resources has greatly expanded. While Munck makes reference to 'mallification' or Walmartization, the larger point is that the transnationalization of finance gave way to the transnationalization of production and then more recently to the transnationalization of services, including the capture by transnational capital of the commercial sector (my concept of transnational capital *includes* Latin American fractions of the emergent transnational capitalist class or TCC). As Latin America has integrated into the new globalized production, financial and service system, these new globalized circuits of accumulation have become internalized through a sweeping transformation of the social and class structure in Latin America, including the rise of local fractions of the TCC and local contingents of an emergent global working class. I cannot here analyze the political economy of capitalist globalization in Latin America (and have done so elsewhere, in *Latin America and Global Capitalism*). Yet, the new political economy involves a dramatic transformation of the social relations of production and the rise of new class groups. Munck makes reference to some of this, largely by citing an eclectic selection of recent literature on these matters yet does not really develop his own analysis or theoretical reflection, as important as that would be for a twenty-first century reimagining of Latin America along the lines of the master frame that informs his study.

Let me reiterate, however, that these are secondary concerns I have with Munck's work. *Rethinking Latin America* is for me a magnificent study that promises to set a benchmark in our efforts to engage with Latin America in this new century.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.903739>