

# 21st century socialism in Latin America: triumphs and facades

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*After the financial crises put free market evangelism on the defence, the message of 21st socialism has found increasing resonance across Latin America and abroad.*

***The Triumph of Politics** gives a comparative and historical overview of the governments of Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa at a time of deep divisiveness and political conflict in the region. **Hassan Akram** finds the book to be timely and important read, although he argues some of the political science concepts did not always suit the cases presented.*



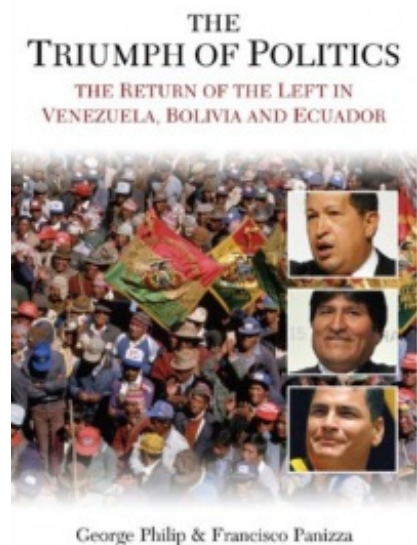
**The Triumph of Politics: The Return of the Left in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. George Philip and Francisco Panizza. Wiley and Polity Books. September 2011.**

## Find this book

The Washington Consensus, that quasi-religious mantra of “liberalisation, privatisation and de-regulation”, is not doing too well at the moment. As the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market in the USA turned into a full-blown global financial crisis, the aggressive defenders of free markets have found themselves on the back foot. Thus George Philip and Francisco Panizza’s *The Triumph of Politics*, an account of the failure of the “Miami Consensus” (the tropical *latino* variant of neo-liberalism), is a particularly timely work.

Philip and Panizza focus on the “high politics” of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Against the background of structural economic failure Presidents Chávez, Morales and Correa employed a variety of strategies to break with the ideological hegemony of “market democracy”. Their alternative, the rhetorically powerful and socially popular 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism remains difficult to define — though this is precisely what the authors bravely attempt.

Rather than giving us a narrative account of the progress of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist governments, the reader receives a thematic analysis. For this reason readers will need a reasonable grounding in the politics of the region to benefit fully from the text. They will also need patience and care. The book’s tripartite structure analyses these governments through their rise to power (using the optics of military intervention and mass protests), their consolidation (through populist rhetoric and plebiscitary









consolidation (through populist rhetoric and plebiscitary politics) and their transformative strategy (via the management of resource rents and regional integration). This is not a simple story, and the authors' diligence, attention to detail and breadth of scholarship demand attention and respect. However, despite the depth and clarity of their work the mainstream political science concepts they employ are often ill-suited to the particularity of the cases discussed, notwithstanding valiant efforts at adaptation.

Throughout the text Philip and Panizza fail to overcome a persistent disjuncture between their neat heuristic tool-kit and the rather messy reality on the ground. They start by looking at the military's role in recent Latin American history. They neatly capture the change from a situation where the military was prepared to involve itself in front-line politics through dictatorship to one where it merely seeks to adjudicate conflicts between the different branches of the state. The idea of "military intervention without dictatorship" is certainly a powerful one, but the authors are not quite able to distinguish between various kinds of intervention. Specifically they refuse to identify a precise relationship between these interventions and the democratic process.

This is a thorny but vital question since the three countries being studied all faced civic and military "intervention" in the name of democracy which sought sometimes to defend and sometimes to topple elected leaders. Philip and Panizza argue that "state bias" (the unfair use of fiscal resources by incumbents to win elections, occasionally including use of the judiciary to harass opponents) reduces 'democratic quality' of elected leaders. This opens up a regulatory role for the military which is not necessarily anti-democratic. They go further, elaborating the fascinating distinction between Type I and Type II civil society movements. The former are seen as stabilising forces which build trust between social actors while the latter are polarising and confrontational. This opens up the possibility of the counter-intuitive situation where an attempted "civil society coup" is prevented by the military, where social activists attempt to bring down democracy while the military act in its defence.

This seemingly paradoxical situation is well captured in *The Triumph of Politics* but the book gives us no clues about when actors can be said to be anti-democratic and when not. Indeed the authors seem almost to hide behind the political science concepts, shying away from any deep normative discussion about the nature of democracy in the region. They mention the dichotomy between majoritarian, radical notions of democracy and pluralist, representative versions which divides 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism from its opponents. They do not, however, fully connect this to their discussion of the historical cases.

The authors do make it clear that Presidents Chávez, Morales and Correa have been repeatedly elected by overwhelming majorities in elections declared free and fair by the most reliable of international observers. They also highlight the anti-democratic actions of their opponents (civil society organisations attempting to pressure the military into suspending elections in Venezuela for example). However they argue that these need to be set against "state bias", the use of government resources to win plebiscites which bypass the traditional political elites. "State bias" is however a double-edged concept. It can damage democracy in situations where the centralisation of resources in the Executive reinforces the concentration and monopolisation of power by elites. But it can also improve democracy when the centralised Executive acts as a "countervailing force", de-concentrating power normally monopolised by economic and social elites.

The essence of radical democracy is this notion of counter-balance to *oligarchy* (a concept almost totally absent from American-dominated modern political science and insufficiently examined by the



Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela (middle) and Rafael Correa, President of Ecuador (right) (Courtesy of estbandid flickr.com)

authors). Philips and Panizza do not analyse the success of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism's anti-oligarchical social policy, even though the UN has produced economic statistics which demonstrate that Venezuela is the Latin American country that has achieved the biggest reductions in poverty and inequality.

*The Triumph of Politics* should be on the reading list of anyone who is interested in the region and wants to deepen their understanding but it must be read in conjunction with other books which fill this lacuna.

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