CHAPTER 11

From Global Capital Accumulation to Varieties of Centre-Leftism in South America: The Cases of Brazil and Argentina

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In the last decade there has been a broad political and ideological shift to the left in the South American continent. Yet different types of political economy regimes can be discerned within this general common trend. A relatively widespread consensus has emerged that presumes that there are two varieties of centre-left administrations in office in the region. Mainstream analyses distinguish countries where a ‘responsible left’ governs (usually seen to include Brazil, Chile under Bachelet, and Uruguay), from countries where old style ‘populism’ is in control of the national state (in particular, Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia).\(^1\) While the former have retained the ‘prudent’ macroeconomic policies of the 1990s (albeit combined with better social policies characterising ‘second generation’ reforms), the latter have relapsed into the ‘classic’ Latin-American populist vice of ‘anti-private-initiative’ state interventionism.\(^2\) By contrast, some left-wing commentators conceive that distinction as one between formally centre-left but substantively ‘neoliberal’ governments, and more genuinely ‘progressive’ ones.\(^3\)

Finally, other radical observers have been more sceptical about the existence of any real substantive change whatsoever in the political forms prevailing in South America.\(^4\) These scholars have pointed to the need to distinguish between \textit{rhetoric} of social change and \textit{actual policies implemented}. Such scholars have argued that many leftist intellectuals and analysts have succumbed uncritically to the symbolic acts through which centre-left governments have accessed state power (essentially, an anti-neoliberal discourse). But in substance, most of these centre-left administrations continue to reproduce

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1. \textit{The Economist} 2006; Bremmer 2006.
2. This is also the view of international financial institutions. See, for example, the critique of the Inter-American Development Bank’s flagship report \textit{The Politics of Policies} in Charnock 2009.
neoliberalism, even if with a ‘human face’. Not much is offered, however, in terms of an actual explanation of the undeniable differences among the centre-left administrations prevailing in South America, which the two previously mentioned approaches do (rightly) note. In other words, these analyses that lump together all current South American centre-left administrations as ‘neo-liberalism with a human face’, do not shed much light on the reasons why such an allegedly revamped neoliberalism has taken a more modern centre-left guise in some countries, while assuming a more classic Latin American populist shape in others.

The present chapter challenges all those ways of approaching the diverse modalities assumed by the South American turn to the left in the past decade, on the grounds that they fail to uncover the essential material basis that is differentially expressed in each type of political regime. In other words, most positions in the debate fail to offer solid foundations for the comparative political and ideological analysis of the economic forms of these national processes of capital accumulation. Instead, they posit the different political and ideological forms that mediate the economic content as constituting in and of themselves the ground or foundation for the comparison between the ‘varieties of centre-leftism’ in South America.

In contrast to the aforementioned approaches, and by way of empirical illustration, here we offer a materialist inquiry into the respective varieties of centre-leftism in Brazil and Argentina. In order to do this, we rely on two main methodological insights from the Marxian critique of political economy. First, we argue that the qualitatively specific national form taken by capitalist development in a particular country should be seen as expressing the determinations of the essentially global unity of the accumulation process on a world scale. Secondly, we grasp the particular political forms prevailing in each country as a necessary mode of existence and motion of the economic content of capital accumulation. Armed with these two insights, the article further submits that capital has been accumulating in Brazil and Argentina under the same specific form, namely: through the appropriation of the extraordinary mass of social wealth existing in those national spaces under the form of ground rent. From this starting point, the article then explores the commonalities and also singularities under which the same specific form of capitalist development has unfolded in these countries, and explains why this qualitatively identical content has recently given rise to diverse political forms within a broader trend of a shift to the centre-left. In a nutshell, we show

5 In our general approach to the critique of political economy, we follow the reading of Capital originally developed by Juan Iñigo Carrera (2007b; 2008a).