



## The Rightward Drift of a Latin American Social Democrat

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Review Essay: Jorge G. Castañeda and Marco A. Morales (eds.). *Leftovers: Tales of the Latin American Left*. New York and London: Routledge, 2008.

Articles in three issues of *Science & Society* have analyzed the positions defended by Jorge Castañeda as part of the journal's symposium "Left Strategy in Latin America" (Ellner, 2004, 2006; Castañeda, 2005). Although Castañeda has moved in a rightward direction since he distanced himself from the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) in 2000 to become foreign minister under conservative Mexican President Vicente Fox, there is consistency in the main thrust of his arguments, which he points to in the book under review (page 92; see also Castañeda, 2006). (1) From the publication of his *Utopia Unarmed* in 1993 until the end of the decade, Castañeda championed social democratic thinking in favor of non-revolutionary change and the need to work within established democratic institutions. The failure to grasp the significance of non-institutional arenas of political action not only characterized Castañeda's writings during his earlier years as a left-leading social democrat, but over the recent past as this essay will attempt to demonstrate. Over the last decade, like so many others who formerly defended social democracy and are now at the center or the right of the political spectrum, Castañeda has failed to formulate concrete proposals for achieving socio-economic transformation.

Both during Castañeda's social democratic years in the 1990s and since then, much of his writing is devoted to criticism of the Latin American left for working outside of established institutions and for going beyond liberal democracy. During this extended period, Castañeda has ignored the fundamental changes on the Latin American left as a whole in favor of the deepening of democracy. The left's transformation predates the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 but has become especially pronounced in recent years. It includes the left's rejection of vanguardism, embracement of radical democracy, attempts to promote popular participation and empowerment, and close ties with social movements.

In his continuous movement to the right, Castañeda has relied on a heavy dose of pragmatism and unprincipled arguments (in addition to the usual factual distortions) to justify his positions. Thus, for example, in 2000 Castañeda attempted to convince Mexican leftists (with negligible results) to endorse the presidential candidacy of Vicente Fox. Castañeda's line of reasoning was that Fox's victory would put an end to the seven decades of ironclad rule of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and open opportunities for the left, even though his policies would accelerate the nation's trend toward neoliberalism. Similarly, in 2003 Castañeda argued that Mexico should break with its long-standing tradition of opposition to foreign intervention by voting in the UN for military action against Iraq in order to enhance Mexican influence on U.S. policy makers. Since his disastrous bid for the Mexican presidency in 2006, Castañeda has been on the front lines of an anti-leftist offensive in Latin America. In May 2009, he joined neoliberal stalwarts including Peruvian writers Mario and Alvaro Vargas Llosa and ex-president of Bolivia Jorge Quiroga in a "liberty forum" in Caracas titled the "The Latin American Challenge" co-sponsored by the Cato Institute. During his stay, Castañeda and other guest speakers put forward criticisms of the government of a type that foreign visitors to the U.S. would be unlikely to express in public. Shortly thereafter, Castañeda attributed the Honduran military coup to President Manuel Zelaya's "alignment" with his "sponsors" Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua ("in that order"). He went on to warn Obama as well as moderate presidents Lula of Brazil and Michelle Bachelet of Chile against taking a hardened position in opposition to the coup since in doing so they would become "mere front men for Hugo Chávez" (Castañeda, 2009).

This latest book applies Castañeda's thinking to the changed setting in Latin America in which the left has scored spectacular gains throughout the continent that have no equivalent at any time in the twentieth century. (2) Thus an analysis of *Leftovers* is of current interest and is not repetitive of previous discussion about Castañeda on the pages of *Science & Society*. It is of particular significance for what it reveals about how a large number of Latin Americans with a social democratic political formation – which was underpinned by the model of state intervention in the economy (known as "import substitution") dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century – evolved in the context of globalization, laissez-faire economics and concomitant popular struggles. Just as Castañeda did in his earlier writings, and as social democrats have generally done throughout modern history (Ellner, 2006), *Leftovers* underestimates subjective conditions for radical change in spite of the left's recent advances.

Castañeda's response to the new auspicious environment in which the left finds itself is to draw a distinction between "good leftists," who are the moderates, and "bad leftists," who are the hardliners. The two-left dichotomy actually dates back to *Utopia Unarmed* which is largely a diatribe against the *Fidelistas* and other armed vanguard movements in Latin America beginning in the 1960s, as opposed to the "democratic left" for the most part labeled by Castañeda "social democratic." Now Castañeda's "bad leftists" are the "radical populists," such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Bolivia's Evo Morales, who are seen as throwbacks to such allegedly demagogic leaders as Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico. (3)

Castañeda originally helped delineate the "good-bad" left distinction in his "Latin America's Left Turn" published in *Foreign Affairs*, along with several other analysts (Petkoff, 2005). In the article, Castañeda argued that the good leftists (or "right leftists") were descendents of traditional leftist parties such as the Chilean Socialist Party, which, "changed its colors" by toning down positions, accepting the imperatives of globalization and in general following a pragmatic course. In contrast, the "wrong leftists" are

descendants of earlier radical populism and extreme nationalism “with few ideological underpinnings.” For them, “rhetoric is more important than substance” and “taunting the United States trumps promoting their countries’ real interests in the world” (Castañeda, 2006). In the eyes of Castañeda, populist leaders are by definition authoritarian opportunists who ride roughshod over established institutions and are devoid of constructive ideas for change. They have few, if any, redeeming qualities.

The Bush administration also promoted the two-left thesis which it translated into a divide-and-rule stratagem with the “good left” governments (such as Socialist President Ricardo Lagos in Chile and Lula in Brazil) receiving special praise in an attempt to pit them against Chávez. The writings of Castañeda and others thus reinforced Washington’s campaign to isolate Chávez and other hard-line leftist leaders.

It is not surprising that Washington spokespeople and politicians who view populist leaders as tantamount to demagogues use the term “populism” lightly without regard for its complex implications. In contrast, Castañeda and several other authors of *Leftovers* are academics who disregard the considerable revisionist research over the last several decades on populist movements that questions traditional assumptions regarding the concept. These works demonstrate that movements led by Perón, Cárdenas, Getulio Vargas (in Brazil) and others were a complex phenomenon and that some of their members began to define long-term objectives. Populism, according to revisionist writing, was a far cry from the traditional view of a relationship of populist caudillo-ignorant masses completely devoid of ideology or institutional concerns and bordering on authoritarianism (French, 1992; Ellner, 1999; James, 2000). (4) The current movements that Castañeda and the Bush administration have labeled the “bad left” represent an even greater departure from the simplistic, pejorative definition of populism (Ellner, 2008: 131-134; Raby, 2006).

*Leftovers*’ lack of rigor in defining and analyzing populism is best illustrated in the book’s discussion of Mexican leftist leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the PRD. (5) In the chapter on Mexico, Kathleen Bruhn (reflecting Castañeda’s view of current Mexican politics) calls López Obrador a “populist caudillo,” a status he inherited from the party’s founder Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and his father, Lázaro Cárdenas, who nationalized the nation’s oil industry in 1938. In labeling the PRD populist, which according to her implies authoritarian tendencies and organizational weakness, she ignores the PRD’s commitment to internal elections ever since the party’s founding in 1989. (Indeed, leftist parties in Latin America have been especially associated with primaries, which Chávez’s Partido Socialista Unido, for example, held to choose its mayoral and gubernatorial candidates in the 2008 elections, unlike the political organizations to its right.)

In attempting to make a case for calling López Obrador a populist and hence a “bad leftist,” Bruhn points to qualities and actions which through different lenses would be considered signs of exemplary combativeness and defense of democratic rights. Thus, for instance, López Obrador’s refusal to accept the announced results of the 2006 presidential elections, and his establishment of a “shadow cabinet” in protest, is characterized as populist-style “antics” (page 223) (Albert Gore’s performance of similar antics in November 2000 may have radically altered the course of recent history for the better.) Given the fact that the first time a PRDista ran in presidential elections in 1988 blatant electoral fraud robbed him of victory (as Castañeda himself recognizes – page 235), and that subsequently Mexico’s two main establishment parties fashioned agreements to isolate the PRD, the possibility of electoral fraud in 2006 is hardly remote. Another example of the dubious applicability of the label “populist” common throughout the book pertains to the Mexican politician’s personal qualities. Bruhn labels López Obrador’s behavior which earned him the reputation of being hard-working, humble and honest “a classic populist style” (page 219).

Finally, Bruhn characterizes López Obrador’s decision to ask voters to ratify his rule as head of the Federal District or vote him out of office as having “populist overtones” (p. 219). Her argument evidently is that recall elections of this type, or “plebiscites” (page 219), are manipulative in that they do not provide voters with alternatives. In fact, recalls and referendums are supported by the PRD and have been incorporated in the constitution of other “bad left” governments in Latin America as a means to promote participatory democracy.

Castañeda’s broadside against Latin American populism must be placed in a broader context in order to explain why those who purport or purported to favor thoroughgoing change are now so adamantly opposed to governments that are producing far-reaching transformations. Populism and social democracy have historically clashed in Latin America and for good ideological reasons. Latin American social democratic thinking, influenced by nineteenth-century positivism, posits that the historical process gradually and inevitably will bring about a more rational and just society and that established institutions are the locus of political change; naked class conflict, mass mobilizations and armed struggle are unnecessary, if not undesirable. Populism does not share this linear vision. In contrast to social democrats, populists draw heavily on national and cultural symbols from the past. For social democrats, populists fail to play by the institutional rules of the game and to respect the limits of executive authority and thus have dubious democratic credentials and commitment. In Argentina social democratic movements opposed the early populist Hipólito Yrigoyen (Adelman, 1992, 236-238), and then the classical populist Perón (Ghioldi, 1956). More recently, Venezuela’s Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), which had gradually evolved toward social democracy after splitting off from the Communist Party in 1970, endorsed Chávez’s first presidential candidacy in 1998 but then broke with him when social and political confrontation intensified. MAS leaders, Castañeda and other ex-social democrats interpret Chávez’s determination to triumph even if it means discarding statesman-like behavior in the face of an aggressive enemy as evidence of an authoritarian streak. Castañeda’s preference for capitulation over extra-institutional struggle helps explain his implicit praise of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas for his refusal to put up a fight against the electoral fraud in 1988 which cost him the presidency (page 235).

Latin American populist movements have demonstrated greater transformational potential than social democratic ones (Laclau, 2005). Thus, for instance, the movements led by Fidel Castro when he came to power in 1959 and Chávez during his early years as president displayed important populist features, such as charismatic leadership, anti-elite discourse, support for radical reforms, organizational weakness and ideological vagueness. In both cases, charisma and appeal to national values were conducive to popular mobilizations which, along with the recent blows received by the enemy to the right, set the stage for socialist-inspired transformation (Ellner, 2005, 160-163; Raby, 2006, 112-121, 190-191). Even social democrats and ex-social democrats who claim to support far-reaching change generally overlook populism’s transformational features and thus oppose radical populist movements and governments, often because of objections over tactics and style (Ellner, 2008, 134-137).

Castañeda's cornerstone argument against the "bad" populist left is that its social and economic policies are not sustainable over time since its demagoguery and doles to the underprivileged fail to contribute to long-term development. Raúl Sánchez Urribarri's chapter on Venezuela goes one step further. Sánchez Urribarri argues that Chávez's "populist baits" (page 191), including "his sophisticated clientelistic dynamics" (page 182) and "well-administered populist agenda" (page 190) that are designed to ensure the support of the general population, represent a virtual straightjacket, which holds the government back from achieving its leftist goals. These assertions regarding the lack of viability of the policies of "bad" leftists distort the facts, but also reveal a fundamental difference between today's Latin American leftists and political leaders to their right. In the first place, specific ambitious undertakings by the "bad" leftist government of Chávez ranging from rail transportation to the Simón Bolívar satellite launched in 2008 refutes Castañeda's claim, as well as that of the Venezuelan opposition, that the "populists" are unable to make things work. In another demonstration of efficacy, the Venezuelan government's breakthrough in income tax collection disproves the statement made at one point by Castañeda that no Latin American government was capable of enforcing the system (Castañeda, 2001, 32).

In the second place, Castañeda's focus on economic production at the expense of other objectives reveals a blind spot in his thinking dating back to his days as a social democrat. While *Leftovers* repeatedly raises the issue of the efficiency and viability of the social and economic programs undertaken by "good" and "bad" left governments, there is scant mention of the empowerment, learning experiences and direct participation of the popular sectors of the population. The goals of increased economic output, efficiency and social transformation are fraught with tension and any effective strategy of far-reaching change in Latin America has to strike a reasonable balance between them. Social programs that promote participation in decision making, as is the case of the community councils in Venezuela which have received massive funding to carry out public works projects, are not the most cost-effective way to build sidewalks, pave roads and construct houses, at least in the short run (Ellner, 2009). Nevertheless, they are the antithesis of the "populist" giveaways to the poor which Castañeda attributes to the "bad" left. Furthermore, by failing to go beyond institutional arenas of struggle, Castañeda plays down the importance of social movements with their potential to stimulate the participation of non-privileged sectors, a shortcoming he was criticized for as far back as the publication of his *Utopia Unarmed* in 1993 (Jimenez, 1994).

Castañeda's arguments regarding globalization, national sovereignty and relations with the United States also converge with social democratic thinking over an extended period of time. His pessimistic assessment of the subjective conditions for far-reaching change in Latin America underpins his argument for toning down, if not abandoning completely, resistance to U.S. global domination. Such an evaluation recalls the European social democratic parties that supported World War I and opposed the Soviet revolution in 1917. Over the years, social democracy became synonymous with a mechanical approach of putting off structural change until all subjective and objective conditions are in place and, in effect, minimizing the importance of popular struggles.

Along these lines Castañeda claims that the vast majority of the population in Latin America rejects leftist-inspired change and a hard line toward Washington, Latin America's dramatic move to the left notwithstanding. Castañeda's appraisal is supported by the chapter written by his co-editor, Marco Morales, which uses two Latin American public opinion surveys to demonstrate that "if any shift [in the continent] is evident, it is one towards the right" (page 21). The conclusion is misleading since the data only refers to the identification of Latin Americans with the labels "rightist," "centrist" and "leftists," without reference to specific policies. More important than the "leftist" label in itself is the growing popular acceptance of socialism. Both Chávez and Evo Morales explicitly advocate socialism and win elections by substantial majorities, a feat unmatched by pro-capitalist candidates.

Castañeda's underestimation of the combativeness of the popular sectors and his overestimation of the viability of U.S. capitalism shape his view of globalization imperatives. Thus the left is advised to "cope with its nationalistic tendencies" and "overcome its reluctance to engage in a globalized world" (page 12). Castañeda asserts that for Latin American nations the "road" to economic growth "runs through the United States, which is by far the largest market in the world" (page 92). The "arcane views on nationalism" (page 93) defended by hard-line leftists like Chávez jeopardize these all-important commercial ties. Ironically, Chávez's critics to his left (often referred to as the "ultra-left"), such as the legendary ex-guerrilla Douglas Bravo, criticize the Venezuelan government for following the opposite course: supplying the enemy, namely the United States, with much needed petroleum. One of the main shortcomings of Castañeda's line of thinking on international relations is that it focuses on anti-U.S. rhetoric as if there were no substance to it, or no real reason to adopt it. In the process, he fails to recognize that from World War II to the present (and not just in the days of the Cold War prior to the 1980s, as he implies on page 94) the United States has consistently used its might to block Latin American governments from carrying out far-reaching change. (6)

Castañeda's acceptance of globalization as an unalterable fact leads him to write that "the left should abandon its last nostalgic ties to the mantra of sovereignty and non-intervention" and instead promote a "new regional and international legal order" (page 242). He adds that just as the European social democratic left censured the government of Jorg Haider in Austria due to its neo-Nazi leanings, Latin American leftists should condemn human rights violation in Cuba in order to assert their democratic credentials. Castañeda's contempt for national sovereignty follows from his rightward drift over recent years. It also reflects the inability of Castañeda with his social democratic heritage to grasp, much less sympathize with, the third-world movement with its banner of non-intervention in the internal affairs of nations. While social democrats envision a path that leads steadily and inevitably to electoral democracy, third-worldism since its origins in the 1950s defends political pluralism on grounds that only by accepting political and ideological diversity can developing nations put forward an agenda in favor of common interests.

Castañeda's rigid separation of the Latin American left into two camps overestimates the distance between moderate and hard-line leftists and fails to recognize their common ground on important issues. Castañeda's sharp contrast between the two is partly the result of his inclusion in the "good left" of the Chilean Socialist Party, which he holds up as the epitome of responsible leftism. The ruling Chilean Socialists do not defend positions that hold the rest of the Latin American left together, such as its critical stand toward U.S.-promoted free trade arrangements and prioritization of Latin American integration.

*Leftovers* largely passes over these areas of convergence. Unlike during the Cold War years, the moderate left governments maintain harmonious relations with countries to their left, specifically Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia. In addition, the united front of moderate and hard-line leftist presidents was instrumental in delivering a fatal blow to the Bush-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) at the Summit of the Americas in 2005, over the objections of centrist presidents such as Vicente Fox of Mexico.

Another common denominator of the moderate and hard-line Latin American leftists is on the social front. Powerful social movements played a key role in the rise to power of hard-left governments in Bolivia and Ecuador, while other leftist governments of both varieties have been closely linked to their social base. The chapter in *Leftovers* by David Altman, Rossana Castiglioni and Juan Pablo Luna contrasts the social ties of moderate leftist governments in Uruguay and Brazil with the Chilean case. They write that Chilean Socialists "can implement the policies they pursue because their social bases were drastically dismantled under Pinochet" (page 171). In another chapter, authors Diana Tussie and Pablo Heidrich refer to the importance of "social policy components" (page 64) of both moderate and hard-line leftist governments, which they contrast with the prioritization of macroeconomic policies over social ones under Chilean Socialist administrations.

*Leftovers*, and the writings of Castañeda in particular, is typical of analyses that focus on established institutions and favor strategies of working exclusively within them, while minimizing the importance of social struggles and the cultural transformation of unrepresented sectors of the population. Castañeda's approach inevitably underestimates political consciousness and the possibilities of far-reaching change in Latin America in the current stage. Undeniably, establishing the parameters for the evaluation of subjective conditions is problematic. Nevertheless, any such methodology must factor in social mobilization and empowerment and the new programs and organizations representing the underprivileged that have figured prominently in the continent over the recent past.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. In *Leftovers*, Castañeda co-authors the chapter "The Current State of the Utopia" with Marco Morales (pp. 3-18) as well as "Resilient Nationalism in the Latin American Left" with Morales and Patricio Navia (pp. 92-101). He is the sole author of the concluding chapter "Where Do We Go From Here?" (pp. 231-243).
2. Not only has the left and moderate left come to power in a number of South American and Central American nations (the latest being El Salvador in 2009), but has emerged as a major force in countries such as Colombia, Peru and Mexico where about two decades ago it lacked an important presence at the national level.
3. The salient, defining characteristics of Latin American populist movements include dependence on a charismatic leader, anti-elite discourse, calls for measures to distribute the wealth to non-privileged sectors, lack of well-defined long-term objectives and organizational weakness.
4. Some writers point to the confusion and misconceptions created by the loose use of the term populism and propose that political scientists completely discard its application for the current period (Robinson, 2008, 289).
5. Two chapters in *Leftovers* provide valuable information on national trajectories of the left without relying on the conceptual framework applied in the rest of the book: the contributions by Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Sofia Checa on Brazil and Martín Tanaka on Peru.
6. Evo Morales, for instance, was hardly posturing when he expelled the U.S. ambassador from his country in September 2008. In three books, Eva Golinger (2007; 2008; 2009) has amply documented diverse forms of U.S. intervention in Venezuela during the Chávez presidency.

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