



Interdisciplinary Political Studies

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/idps>

ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue 4(1) 2018: 243-248

DOI: 10.1285/i20398573v4n1p243

Published on July 15, 2018

BOOK REVIEW

US Power in Latin America: Renewing Hegemony, by Rubrick Biegon. New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 208.

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US presence in Latin America has been challenged by New Left movements from the early Cold War era up to the late 1990s and early 2010s, as “Pink Tide” governments rose across the continent. While several policy-makers attribute the United States’ geopolitical decline to the emergence of the New Latin Left (NLL), Rubrick Biegon follows a different path. The author of *US Power in Latin America* proposes the study of hegemony “as a unified, asymmetrical social relationship combining material and ideational elements of coercion, consensus-building and ideological legitimation” (p.2).

Biegon aims to show how the US has sought to renew its hegemonic position in the Americas through an open-ended, non-linear process (p.3). The *US Power in Latin America* is an effort to utilise a neo-Gramscian, historical materialist and interpretivist approach to the study of US hegemony in Latin America. The book also takes into account theoretical and analytical tools from different traditions and disciplines in an attempt to reinvigorate the perspective on the US involvement in the region. For that purpose, Biegon adopts textual (discourse and content) analysis

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methods to study official documents and statements of the US, international organisations, as well as Wikileaks sources.

Biegon's main argument is that there is a continuity in the US presence in the Americas since the Monroe Doctrine era. Occasional variations reflect shifts caused by different Latin American states and regional organisations that do not change US policy in a radical manner. Thus, the US sought to protect its hegemonic position in Latin America through four different forms of power: structural, coercive, institutional and ideological.

Hegemony is perceived in Gramscian terms, meaning that the dominant group rules on the overlapping spheres of political society through coercion, and of civil society through consent. Traditional international relations approaches focus on state power capabilities and institutional dominance, and often underplay economic production and the multiplicity of the hegemonic relation. Contrarily, the author bases his analysis on the material and ideational aspects of reality that form the asymmetric and dynamic social relation between the hegemonic power and the subordinate actors. In this sense, Biegon forms his approach on Gramsci's hegemony and builds on the work of Robert Cox, Susan Strange and Robert Gilpin.

In this framework, the NLL governments constitute a counter-hegemonic challenge to the US establishment. The book offers a typology of the NLL based on their opposition to the neoliberal paradigm. There is a differentiation between the overtly anti-neoliberal radicals, and the moderates that implement social policies within neoliberalism. Despite categorisations, one way or another, all NLL governments attempt to strengthen state authority by challenging the dominant, free market Washington Consensus dictated by the US through redistributive and developmentalist policies. What is more, Latin American governments "have committed

themselves to a common agenda of economic diversification, regional integration, and development policies that spur not just growth but equality” (p.13).

For each of the abovementioned forms of power (structural, coercive, institutional and ideological), Biegon explores a specific expression of the US hegemony in Latin America.

For the analysis of structural power, the author examines the US trade policy in the NLL age. He illustrates a clear picture of the US structural power established and maintained through international and regional organisations, structures and norms, and the contesting counter-hegemonic attempts of the NLL governments to create and sustain alternatives to the dominant normality of neoliberalism.

For the coercive power he goes through the US military strategy in the region and its adjustment as a response to the rise of the NLL. The analysis accentuates the turn from the Bush administration “War on Terror” to Obama’s “Smart Power.” The former had signalled the outright confrontation of guerrilla groups characterised as narco-terrorists, while the latter initiated a turn to a “smarter” use of power packaged in a soft cell. Biegon claims that changes in the use of coercive power, not only do not shake down the argument of a continuous US hegemonic policy but also strengthen it.

When it comes to institutional power, he examines the traditional, hegemonic role of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in comparison to its policy turn under the leadership of the leftist José Miguel Insulza. Despite the fact that Insulza positioned himself in the moderate side of Latin Left, the US were initially concerned about his “soft hand” on radical NLL leaders. Additionally, the rise of new, contesting regional organisations challenges the existing hegemonic order and signifies Latin America’s new regionalism.

As for the ideological power, Biegon goes into the construction of the narrative of “false, radical populism” in US diplomatic and policy discourse. He presents the dominant narrative under which American hegemonic normality characterises every alternative and contending policy as populist. All “nationalist,” “leftist,” “socialist,” “Bolivarian,” “pan-Latin American” and “anti-imperialist” ideas and values are stigmatised as populist. In this way, US officials’ public statements set and renew the discourse of hegemonic normality, and at the same time try to repel the appeal of the populist construct that threatens American ideological power. Although populism is by no means a new concept in Latin America, the US uses the ambiguity of the term in order to create a narrative of a political, economic and security threat descending from outdated visions of undemocratic, violent demagogues.

Biegon concludes that despite transformations in US-Latin America relations, the US remains hegemonic, and that whether or not unipolarity is in decline, the fluidity of power does not point to much enthusiasm for a post hegemonic future. Unlike the overall critical analysis followed throughout the book, the conclusion seems to follow an old-fashioned historical materialism that does not offer much in terms of theoretical innovation.

Overall, Rubrick Biegon’s pluralistic approach is robust. His focus on the interweaving, overlapping forms of power and the fluidity of the social process of hegemony creates an informed view of the subject-matter. What is more, the *US Power in Latin America* is a fresh, interdisciplinary effort to study a domain and a region that has long been dominated by hard International Relations, security and strategic analyses. So far, most researchers of the NLL and US power have focused on the anti-hegemonic, anti-neoliberal struggle of the leftist governments (Artz,

Chodor, Levitsky & Roberts Ludlam, Panizza, Silva), while others follow the liberal tradition (Fukuyama) or argue for a US neo-imperialism (Chomsky and Grandin).

On the one hand, given the theoretical richness, the understanding of US politics in the region, and the solid argument of hegemonic continuity, it is somewhat disappointing as Biegon refrains from offering his insights on the near future of the US-Latin America asymmetrical relation. On the other, he raises questions for further research such as the ways in which the Chinese involvement in the region will challenge US hegemony and the impact of the election of Donald Trump on the US hegemonic policy.

US Power in Latin America is highly recommended for those interested in the Gramscian hegemonic theory and in neo-Marxist approaches in International Relations and researchers of patterns in the US hegemonic power. On the contrary, the book does not offer much to those interested in the rise of the NLL.

Beyond the US and Latin America, the main theoretical contribution of the book lies in the analysis of the discursive domination of the hegemonic normality over the anti-hegemony “through common sense understandings [that] serve the leadership position of the dominant group” (p.30) and the efforts of the counter-hegemony to challenge it. This dimension is usually stacked under the “soft power” label and sets aside for the benefit of more pragmatic, resource-based analyses of international politics. For that reason, traditional approaches fail to grasp the overlapping nature of different forms of power and the economic relations that lie in the basis of hegemonic asymmetry. This leads to conclusions with limited analytical power. Either in the case of the “pied pipers of populism” (p. 150) in Latin America, or in the rise of the European (right or left-wing) populists there is a need to synthesise new theoretical tools and to experiment with interdisciplinary interpretive

schemes in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena. The *US Power in Latin America* by Rubrick Biegon definitely points in this direction.

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