

# THE RIGHT IN LATIN AMERICA

Elite Power, Hegemony and the Struggle for the State

**Barry Cannon**



Cannon shines a bright light on the Right, which has continued to adapt and exercise influence outside the gaze of most experts on Latin America. He describes the varied sources – economic, military, transnational, political, and transnational – of elite power in the region in a book that is accessible to the public but will intrigue scholars as well.

*Daniel Hellinger, Professor of International Relations, Webster University, USA*

Cannon has provided us with timely analysis and a valuable theoretical framework for understanding contemporary Latin American politics at a time when the Right is resurgent and the region faces renewed crisis and upheaval.

*William I. Robinson, Professor of Sociology, Global Studies, and Latin American Studies,  
University of California at Santa Barbara, USA*

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Most current analysis on Latin American politics has been directed at examining the shift to the Left in the region. Very little attention, however, has been paid to the reactions of the Right to this phenomenon. What kind of discursive, policy and strategic responses have emerged among the Right in Latin America as a result of this historic turn to the Left? Have there been any shifts in attitudes to inequality and poverty as a result of the successes of the Left in those areas? How has the Right responded strategically to regain the political initiative from the Left? And what implications might such responses have for democracy in the region?

*The Right in Latin America* seeks to provide answers to these questions while helping to fill a gap in the literature on contemporary Latin American politics. Unlike previous studies, Barry Cannon's book does not simply concentrate on party political responses to the contemporary challenges for the Right in the region. Rather he uses a wider, more comprehensive theoretical framework, grounded in political sociology, in recognition of the deep social roots of the Right among Latin America's elites, in a region known for its startling inequalities. Using Michael Mann's pioneering work on power, he shows how elite dominance in the key areas of the economy, ideology, the military and in transnational relations, has had a profound influence on the political strategies of the Latin American Right. He argues that Left governments, especially the more radical ones, have threatened elite power in these areas, influencing Right-wing strategic responses as a result. These responses, he persuasively suggests, can vary from elections, through street protests and media campaigns, to military coups, depending on the level of perceived threat felt by elites from the Left. In this way, Cannon uncovers the dialectical nature of the Left/Right relationship in contemporary Latin American politics, while simultaneously providing pointers as to how the Left can respond to the challenge of the Right's resurgence in the current context of Left retrenchment. Cannon's multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach, including original research among Right-leaning actors in the region, makes the book an essential reference – not only for those interested in the contemporary Latin American Right, but for anyone interested in the region's politics at a critical juncture in its history.

**Barry Cannon** is a Lecturer in Politics at Maynooth University, Ireland. His research is primarily centred on Latin American politics, with particular expertise on Peru, Venezuela and Central America.

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struggle for the state

*Barry Cannon*

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**In memory of my dearest friend Susan Howieson – for her  
courage and determination**

**To Peadar – teacher, mentor, friend – with heartfelt thanks**



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# ABBREVIATIONS

ALBA	Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America/ Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America
ARENA	Alianza Republicana Nacionalista/National Republican Alliance
Bancosur	Banco del Sur/Bank of the South
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CAFTA-DR	Central America–Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement
CELAC	Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños/ Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CEP	Centro de Estudios Públicos/Centre for Public Studies
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
FTAA	Free Trade Area of the Americas
ICSID	International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes
IFI	International Financial Institution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISI	Import Substitution Industrialisation
Mercosur	Mercado Común del Sur/Common Market of the South
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OAS	Organization of American States
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Pacific Alliance
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional/National Action Party
RN	Renovación Nacional/National Renovation
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership

## **xii** Abbreviations

TTIP	Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
UDI	Unión Demócrata Independiente/Independent Democratic Union
UNASUR	Unión de Naciones Suramericanas/Union of South American Nations

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image speaks to a number of issues raised in this book – the basis of economic activity and who it benefits, the globalisation of capital, the interconnectedness of global elites etc. It is also dedicated to Peadar Kirby – teacher, mentor, friend – whose initial faith in me at DCU allowed me to start out on this adventure as an academic and so continue to pursue my love for, and interest in, Latin America and its people.



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# 1

## INTRODUCTION: THE RIGHT IN LATIN AMERICA

### Elite power, hegemony and the struggle for the state

The election, in 1998, of Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela was the beginning of what many came to term a “pink tide” of Left and Left-of-centre governments sweeping over Latin America. Chávez remained in power until his death in 2013, and during that time most of South America and some countries in Central America elected Left-leaning governments. By 2014 the momentum did not seem to be faltering, with ten countries – Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador and, of course, Cuba – having Left-led governments. It is unsurprising then that most academic work on politics in the region has been directed at studying this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The literature, of course, has varying views on the nature and characteristics of these governments and notes degrees of diversity within them. Nevertheless, a level of consensus exists in so far as these disparate governments are viewed as critical of neoliberal orthodoxy and are prepared to use state power in an attempt to counterbalance the perceived negative social impacts of markets.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the “pink tide” has not swept all before it. The 2014 elections in Colombia, for example, became, in the final stages, a contest between two candidates on the Right, with the Left barely registering.<sup>3</sup> Mexico remained governed by the conservative PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional/National Action Party) throughout most of the period of the “pink tide” until it lost to the erstwhile populist PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional/Institutional Revolutionary Party) in 2013. Yet this seemed only to intensify the neoliberal policies of its predecessor, with the government of Enrique Peña Nieto, for example, opening up the state oil company, PEMEX, to the private sector. Peru, despite having nominally populist (Alan García, 2006–2011) or Left-leaning (Ollanta Humala, 2011–2016) presidents, continued implementing neoliberal policies under its neoliberalised constitution, which had been instituted under President Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000). Chile, after

electing Socialist Party President Michelle Bachelet twice (2006–2010; 2014–2018) and an interlude with Right President Sebastián Piñera (2010–2014), maintained its policies favouring neoliberal economic orthodoxy, albeit accompanied by vigorous social policy, containing to some degree the worst excesses of the market.

All of these countries have free trade agreements (FTAs) with the United States and are grouped into the Pacific Alliance, a loose intergovernmental body, officially founded in 2012 and favouring free trade and open markets. As the trade bloc's information brochure reminds us, the Alliance member countries account for 35 per cent of the total GDP of the Latin American and Caribbean region, 50 per cent of its trade and 36 per cent of its population.<sup>4</sup> The “pink tide” then has not turned into a tsunami, and a large part of the region remains under Right or Right-leaning rule, or at least heavily influenced by neoliberal orthodoxy.

Nor has the Right been dormant within those countries ruled by the Left. All countries have reasonably important Right or Right-of-centre oppositions, which has sometimes led to electoral success, as in Chile in 2010 with the election of Sebastian Piñera (2010–2014), in Panama, with Ricardo Martinelli (2009–2014), and in Guatemala, with retired general Otto Pérez Molina (2012–2015) to name a few. In 2015 the Right gained momentum in the region with wins for Mauricio Macri of PRO (Propuesta Republicana/Republican Proposal) in Argentina and the MUD (Mesa de Unidad Democrática/Democratic Unity Coalition) in Venezuela's parliamentary elections. And while most Right opposition activity remains within constitutional boundaries, these limits are sometimes stretched, as in the lightning impeachment of Left-of-centre President Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2012, or abandoned, as in the failed coup against Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 2002 and the successful overthrow of Manuel Zelaya (2006–2009) in Honduras in 2009. Nor does Right opposition activity always remain within party-based and parliamentary structures, with Argentina, Bolivia and Venezuela all seeing sustained street campaigns aimed at weakening or forcing the removal of sitting Left or Left-leaning presidents. Hence not only has the “pink tide” failed to turn into a tsunami, but the Right continues to try to force back that tide, using fair means and sometimes foul.

The Latin American Right, then, remains a force to be reckoned with, but this fact is rarely reflected in the literature. The phenomenon has been understudied in the past with little work dedicated to the subject,<sup>5</sup> although there has been something of an upsurge in interest with a number of books and articles being published more recently.<sup>6</sup> This book aims to build on this legacy but also to go beyond it. In it I argue that most of the major work on the subject of the Latin American Right approaches the phenomenon from a narrow political science perspective, while finding invariably that Right-wing actors do not conform to theoretical expectations. Furthermore, what is lacking in the literature is an articulation of the Right with the study of elite power. By elites what I mean, following Higley, is “persons who, by virtue of their strategic locations in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements, are able to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially”.<sup>7</sup> These consist of “prestigious and ‘established’ leaders – top politicians, important

businessmen, high-level civil servants, senior military officers”<sup>8</sup> and “counter-elites” found in trade union and social movement leaderships, among others, although it is the former with whom we are most concerned here.

While there is a good, solid tradition of studying elites in Latin America,<sup>9</sup> few of those studying the Right have sought to link the former to the latter in a systematic way. Gibson<sup>10</sup> comes closest with his concepts of “core constituency” and “non-core constituencies”, whereby “core constituencies” are “those sectors of society that are most important to [a party’s] political agenda and resources” and non-core constituencies are other groups whose support is garnered in the “quest to build an electoral majority”.<sup>11</sup> Yet, even here, the main emphasis is on the party political aspect of the Right rather than on its “core constituency”. Hence most scholars of the Latin American Right are left struggling to explain the fact that historically, Latin American elites have rarely used established political parties as the main focus of their power strategies, preferring to use their dominance of the ideological, economic, military and international power networks to maintain their hegemony.

Consequently, I argue here that we need a broader, more adaptable framework of analysis, which can take these factors into account in a more systematised and comprehensive manner. For this reason, I adopt Michael Mann’s theories on social power,<sup>12</sup> whereby he conceptualises domination of the four networks of power – economic, ideological, political and military – as the primary sources of social power. Following Eduardo Silva,<sup>13</sup> I add a fifth, transnational area. These I use as a framework to demonstrate both the extent of elite power in Latin America, and how the Left has challenged this in various countries in the region since coming to power democratically. From there I use it to show how the depth of these challenges can also help inform the types of strategies which the elites use to re-establish their dominance of political power – that is the state – and so counter this hegemonic challenge from the Left. The struggle for control of the state is therefore an essential part of this analysis, but it is not privileged, as Mann’s framework allows us to demonstrate how that struggle is contextualised by elite power in these other key areas. In summary then, this is a book about the sources of domination of Latin American socio-economic elites in the current stage of capitalism, meaning neoliberalism; about the social, economic and political models they favour, meaning socially unequal market societies accompanied by liberal democracies providing state protection for market relations, private property rights, and, therefore, continued elite dominance; about the possibilities for counter-movements to this elite dominance; and about elite strategies to combat those counter-movements and re-establish their dominance more fully. Ultimately, this volume seeks to identify more clearly the sources of social power that maintain neoliberal hegemony and so contribute to thinking about how to counter-act this.<sup>14</sup>

I develop the argument as follows. In Chapter 2, I seek to clarify the nature of the Right in the current context of neoliberalism, identifying its main sources of social power. First, I present the analytical frame in more detail, providing a

discussion on the distinction between Left and Right, and agreeing with Bobbio<sup>15</sup> in his insistence that it centres on issues of equality. This is fitting considering the high levels of inequality found in the region, not just in terms of class, but also in terms of the gender and ethnic inequalities which intersect with it.<sup>16</sup> I argue that this distinction around equality can have class and ideological manifestations and that in the current historical context in Latin America, the key ideological objective for elites is the defence, maintenance and extension of neoliberalism and thus the privileges of the elites, which it favours. I then provide an overview of the main edited works on the Latin American Right,<sup>17</sup> arguing that for the most part their institutionalist, pluralist, political science focus leaves them ill-equipped to deal with the broader ideological, class and power issues consistently identified by all of them. Hence, I propose Mann's framework as a solution to the paradox of an elite that, historically at least, seems little interested in politics, contradicting the main theoretical focus of political science theories examining the Right.

In Chapter 3, I examine discourse on key policy issues current in Right-oriented political parties and civil society organisations, uncovering how neoliberal thinking underpins such policy to a wide-ranging degree. Concentrating on the key areas of equality – class, race and gender – and state/market relations, which are the areas where the Right has been challenged most by Left governments in the region, and using material from a wide range of interviews with politicians and civil society actors in four countries – Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Venezuela – I find little change of emphasis from neoliberal precepts. There is a rejection of inequalities as an issue in general, but an increased discursive awareness of the need to tackle poverty. The chapter illustrates emphatically the general uniformity of elite thinking around neoliberalism, a fact reinforced by similar studies such as that by Reis on Brazil, among others.<sup>18</sup>

In Chapter 4, I examine the situation in those countries which are most dominated by neoliberalism, to illustrate empirically how the five sources of social power support the neoliberal project in the region. First, I briefly review earlier writings on Central America where I argued that elite dominance remains relatively intact across all five power areas, with, however, substantial inroads being made by Left governments in El Salvador and Nicaragua.<sup>19</sup> In those articles I described these countries as *Right-oriented state/society complexes* in order to indicate the extent to which neoliberalism and hence elite power dominates both the state and civil society within each of them – in other words most of the power networks identified by Mann. I then examine the situation in four larger countries – Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru – all of them grouped into the relatively new transnational organisation, the Pacific Alliance. Again, I argue that these countries are similarly restricted in terms of departing from neoliberal tenets due to the deep embeddedness of neoliberalism in each power network and the benefits which elites accrue from these policies as a result.

In Chapter 5, I return to Mann's framework to argue that despite this deep embeddedness of neoliberalism across the power structure in most countries, the

Right has lost elements of hegemony in some of the power networks under the “pink tide”. I examine the areas of power identified – economic, political, ideological, military, transnational – and using proxy forms of measurement drawn from Right- or liberal-leaning think tank indexes, I illustrate graphically the extent to which Left governments have halted or reversed neoliberalised elite dominance in some of these areas. While the extent of reversal in Left-governed countries varies significantly, the fact that it has been reversed in any manner makes it imperative that elites articulate a response to this challenge at the level of the political, and that the ideological basis of that response remains neoliberalism. Here, I suggest that strategies to regain power vary depending on the level of threat felt by elites from the different Left governments.

This argument is developed more substantially in Chapter 6. Here, I depart from schematic and geographically determined typologies<sup>20</sup> and instead develop a more open-ended dialectical concept revolving around pragmatic risk assessment. This, I argue, is calculated in terms of the perceived threat felt from the Left to the elite’s key objectives and in terms of popular acceptance or rejection of the different sets of strategic approaches – electoral, mobilisational and extra-constitutional – available. These are explicitly linked back to the extent of neoliberal policy reversal implemented by Left-led governments, although it is also dependent on subjective assessment of threats by elite actors, which can vary from country to country. In Chapter 7, I then summarise findings and assess the prospects for the Left in the context of those.

In this way, this volume aims to go beyond orthodox political science approaches, with their relatively exclusive focus on parties and institutions. This approach rather seeks to identify the sources of social power, and analytically integrate these to an analysis of the Right. Yet, this book is not simply a descriptive account of the Latin American Right in the current context of “pink tide” Latin America. It aims also to give the reader a sense of where the Right is going with regard to policy and strategy, so as to assess how it plans to regain the initiative from the Left and hence its traditional hegemony in the region. In this way the aim is not just to help us understand better the nature and intentions of the Latin American Right in the current context, but to do so in a theoretically innovative manner which captures more fully the phenomenon’s complexity.

## Notes

- 1 More recent work on the Left in the region includes: Ellner, Steve (ed.), 2014. *Latin America’s Radical Left: Challenges and Complexities of Political Power in the Twenty-First Century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield; Webber, Jeffrey R. and Barry Carr (eds), 2012. *The New Latin American Left: Cracks in the Empire*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield; Chodor, Tom, 2015. *Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America: Breaking Up with TINA?* Houndmills: Palgrave; Burbach, Roger, Michael Fox and Federico Fuentes, 2013. *Latin America’s Turbulent Transitions: The Future of Twenty-First-Century Socialism*. London: Zed; Wylde, Christopher, 2012. *Latin America after*

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- 2 Cannon, Barry and Peadar Kirby (eds), 2012. *Civil Society and the State in Left-Led Latin America: Challenges and Limitations to Democratization*. London: Zed, p. 11.
  - 3 Blanco, Silva, 2014. 'La izquierda se queda fuera de juego en la campaña electoral colombiana', in *El País*, 21 May. Available at: [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2014/05/21/actualidad/1400700515\\_725484.html](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2014/05/21/actualidad/1400700515_725484.html). Accessed: 10/06/2015
  - 4 *The Pacific Alliance*, n.d. Available at: <http://alianzapacifico.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ABC-ALIANZA-DEL-PACIFICO-PRENSA-INGLES.pdf>. Accessed: 10/06/2015.
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  - 6 See for example Dominguez, Francisco, Geraldine Lievesely, and Steve Ludlum (eds), 2011. *Right-Wing Politics in the New Latin America: Reaction and Revolt*. London: Zed; Zibechi, Raúl, 2008. 'The New Latin American Right: Finding a Place in the World', in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 41(1), January/February, 2008, pp. 13–19; Palau, Marielle (ed.), 2010. *La ofensiva de las derechas en el cono sur*. Asunción: BASEIS and RLS; Luna, Juan Pablo and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (eds), 2014. *The Resilience of the Latin American Right*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
  - 7 Higley, John, 2008. 'Elite Theory in Political Sociology'. Available at: <http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/view/4036>. Accessed: 11/08/2015. Emphasis in original, no page number.
  - 8 Higley, 'Elite Theory'.
  - 9 See for example: Lipset, Seymour M. and A. Solari, 1967. *Elites in Latin America*. Oxford University Press, Oxford; Higley, John and Richard Gunther (eds), 1992. *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Bull, Benedicte and Mariel Aguilar-Støen (eds), 2015. *Environmental Politics in Latin America: Elite Dynamics, the Left Tide and Sustainable Development*. London and New York: Routledge.
  - 10 Gibson, Edward L., 1992. 'Conservative Electoral Movements and Democratic Politics: Core Constituencies, Coalition Building, and the Latin American Electoral Right', in Chalmers et al., *The Right and Democracy*, pp. 13–43.
  - 11 Ibid., p. 28.
  - 12 Mann, Michael, 1986. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Mann, Michael, 1993. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 2, The Rise of Classes and Nation States 1760–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Mann, Michael, 2012. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 3, Global Empires and Revolution, 1890–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Mann, Michael, 2012. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 4, Globalizations, 1945–2011*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
  - 13 Silva, Eduardo, 2009. *Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 14 I am indebted to Eduardo Silva for helping me to clarify these essential characteristics of the project.
- 15 Bobbio, Norberto, 1996. *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- 16 See for example López Calva, Felipe and Nora Lustig, 2010. *Dedining Inequality in Latin America: A Decade of Progress?* Baltimore, MD: Brookings and UNDP; Blofield, Merike (ed.), 2011. *The Great Gap: Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution in Latin America*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press; Huber, Evelyne and John D. Stephens, 2012. *Democracy and the Left: Social Policy and Inequality in Latin America*. Chicago, IL: University Press.
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