

Bagley, Bruce M. and Defort, Magdalena (eds.) (2015) *Decline of US Hegemony? A Challenge of ALBA and a New Latin American Integration of the Twenty-First Century*, Lexington Books (Lanham/Boulder/New York/London), xxi + 438 pp. \$110.00 hbk. \$104.00 ebk.

The nineteen essays that comprise this book are the declared product of an ‘international group of experts’ meeting at the University of Miami in 2011, related to an ‘Interdisciplinary Research Group’ co-directed by the editors on ‘democratic transition, illiberalism, and authoritarian politics in Latin America’ (p. x). Within this ideological framing, the book squarely fits the US Department of State interventionist agenda against decolonialist and counter-imperialist projects. As the – unfortunately incomplete – contributors’ section reveals, almost all contributors (some of them journalists) can be viewed as, in Gramscian terms, organic intellectuals at the service of bourgeois interests regarding knowledge production. Be that as it may, the problems of this book lie elsewhere.

First, published in July 2015, this is *not* ‘the first comprehensive analysis of ALBA and related initiatives’ (p. ix), and the book was already obsolete when it went into print. Heavily relying on sources from the mid- to late-2000s, key literature on ALBA and related projects is absent (e.g., *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, 2011; Muhr, 2011, 2013; Angosto-Ferrández, 2014; Aponte-García, 2014). Core issues, such as Bolivarian philosophy and socialism (Chapter 2), were discussed at the time with much greater profundity elsewhere (e.g., Gott, 2005; Raby, 2006). Most strikingly, assuming that ‘Ecuador became ALBA’s last member in 2009’ (p. 187), ALBA is persistently reduced to eight nation-states (e.g., pp. 2, 38, 44, 93n2, 334, 371), despite the fact that three more members joined in 2013/2014. Consistent use of past tense throughout (wrongly) suggests that ALBA had ceased to exist.

Second, the book fails to stand up to its claim of expert research-based analysis. Except for some footnotes (p. 157n27; p. 179n1; pp. 220/221, multiple notes), I could not detect any indications of actually conducted fieldwork. Mostly a mix of descriptive narration and journalistic commentary, for page after page the reader faces unsubstantiated claims and superficial cliché-ridden stories disproportionately culled from media sources (for particularly salient examples, see Chapters 16 to 19), interspersed with quotes from primary documents, rather than arguments and explanations arrived at through systematic, rational and theoretically informed discussion in dialogue with empirical evidence within a coherent methodological framework. Islamophobia (Chapter 11) and utter Western-centrism (Chapter 16) mix with Chávez-centrism (eight out of the nineteen chapters), accompanied by the usual attributions of ‘caudillo’/‘caudillismo’ (pp. xviii, 3, 36, 61, 68, 188, 374), ‘authoritarianism’ (pp. 60, 374), ‘populism’/‘populist’ (pp. 61, 68, 98, 278, 321, 341), and the like, without any theoretical exploration of such concepts. Even the key notion of ‘hegemony’ remains undiscussed, taking the mainstream international relations/politics meaning of dominance of a country for granted. In this theoretical void, Doreen Massey’s prominent concept of ‘power-geometry’, on which she advised the Venezuelan government in the 2000s, is (in the absence of any reference to Massey’s work) invented as ‘[a] new doctrine that gives the Venezuelan Armed Forces

an active political role' (pp. 194, 200n32; on 'power geometry' generally, and with respect to Venezuela, see Massey 1993, 2009).

Three chapters, though, do contribute to academic discussions. Khatchik Der Ghougassian (Chapter 10) joins empirical research with a comparative 'structural approach' (p. 162) that not only rejects the derisive 'populist labelling' (p. 162) but, more importantly, reveals the commonalities among ALBA and UNASUR, thus correcting the usual (also throughout this book) dichotomisation of a Venezuela-led ALBA vs a Brazil-led UNASUR. Marcela Ganem's (Chapter 12) field research of the Initiative of South American Regional Infrastructure (IIRSA) provides insightful details of this project, usually marginalised in discussions of Latin American integration. Finally, the comparative analysis of MERCOSUR, Andean Community and ALBA makes Chapter 14, by Roberto Domínguez, the only chapter that develops a coherent argument (laid out on p. 238) informed by a thorough academic literature review and theoretically guided by theories of regionalism/regionalisation. It is the only chapter to consider the indispensability of South-South cooperation to understanding ALBA's capability of 'delivering collective goods to its member states' (p. 255).

Thomas Muhr

Habib University Karachi/University of Nottingham

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