



Rebuilding the Latin American left

Fri, 15/06/2007 - 17:00

Andy York reviews *Rebuilding the Left* by Marta Harnecker, Zed Books, 2007

Marta Harnecker is a long time activist on the Latin American left. Originally from Chile, upon the overthrow of the left-wing government of Salvador Allende by General Pinochet in 1973 she went into exile in Cuba, where she runs the *Memoira Popular Latinoamerica* research institute. In her new book, *Rebuilding the Left*, she addresses the new movements against neoliberalism that have sprung up across the continent. Harnecker, like a number of left activists in the social movements, is a supporter of Hugo Chávez and the 'Bolivarian Revolution'. She works as an advisor to the Chávez government and her book can be seen as an attempt to theorise the new left politics she believes it expresses.

Harnecker sees her book as responding to what she calls a 'crisis' in the Latin American left, whereby it is polarised between an increasingly neoliberal right wing and a woefully sectarian left. This is a result, she argues, of four decades of neoliberal globalisation marked by the failure of the left to establish a coherent, alternative economic and political project to the 'Washington Consensus'. However, she believes the Bolivarian Revolution offers a new, viable left project and she attempts to give it a theoretical foundation at the level of Marxist theory and sketch out a relatively universal political programme she hopes will be taken up elsewhere.

The effect of this is to give an Marxist gloss to the new populist reformist left in Latin America - its weaknesses are not subject to revolutionary critique by Harnecker but held up as a model for others to follow. In this extended review we make a critique of the theory and strategy Harnecker proposes. As we shall see, Harnecker openly propagates the idea that bourgeois institutions may be used as instruments of radical transformation, puts forward a programme based on a series of reformist demands and, perhaps worst of all, recycles the Stalinist theory of the popular front in new, more fashionable language.

The anti-neoliberal bloc

Harnecker starts out with an analysis of the 'new world' created by globalisation. The debt crisis in the 1980s led to government after government across Latin America caving into the demands of the USA and International Monetary Fund to open up their economies to international capital. In this period a number of unpopular dictators fell in several key countries and were replaced by bourgeois democratic governments that tended to converge around a pro-American, neoliberal economic programme.

Over time this led to widespread disillusionment in politicians, political institutions and, in particular, the acquiescence to neoliberalism of more traditional left populist parties. This created a political space to the left of them - one that became increasingly occupied by anti-neoliberal social movements. Harnecker rightly emphasises the necessity of any socialist party worthy of the name to orient to these movements and seek to influence them politically.

In addition, Harnecker believes that neoliberal restructuring has done something altogether more profound than simply creating a new political space. She argues the classical working class has diminished in size and importance to be replaced by more heterogeneous forms of class structure à la Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 'multitude'. They and Harnecker argue new popular forces, across a range of classes, have created a new social subject, expressed in the growth of social movements.

Harnecker argues for a popular politics she calls an 'anti-neoliberal social and political bloc'. For Harnecker this includes not just the urban and rural working class, the poor and unemployed, but also the 'the impoverished middle

strata, a constellation of owners of small and medium-sized businesses? professionals? the police and the lower ranks of the army?1. She criticises what she perceives to be the one-sided emphasis placed on the industrial working class by the traditional left and even goes as far as to argue that this bloc ?could also include capitalist sectors whose business activity has entered into an objective contradiction with transnational capital?2.

It is Harnecker?s error at the level of the political subject that leads to this populist outlook. Across the global south the uneven and combined development of capitalism means that industrial production often exists side by side with pre-capitalist and peripheral class structures. However, the importance of working class wage labourers (particularly those in the big companies) is that, when they withdraw their labour, capitalist production cannot continue and becomes threatened. To take Bolivia as an example, general strikes were crucial in shutting down the country and forcing out presidents in 2003 and 2005.

It is certain that the working class will have to rally the urban poor and peasants to its programme and fight for their demands too ? such as land for the peasants. However, the programme of Harnecker proposes something altogether different ? unity with the ?anti-imperialist? and ?democratic? capitalist class in a classic popular front. This is not a new idea but, as Harnecker should know given her Stalinist background, one that was implemented with catastrophic effect in the crisis ridden 1930s. In Spain and France the workers dropped their socialist demands and revolutionary struggle for state power in order to side with their own exploiters and maintain the latter in power.

It is precisely because the class relationship between worker and boss is an antagonistic and exploitative one that they each have objectively different political programmes ? one to develop a better environment for capitalist profit, the other fighting for the full socialisation of production under the control of the working class itself. It is because the weak semi-colonial bourgeoisie is too frightened of the potential power of its own working class to fight consistently for its own liberation, that the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky argued that the workers would have to lead democratic and anti-imperialist struggles, and in so doing lead uninterruptedly towards working class power and socialism ? in a ?permanent revolution?.

Party and Programme

Harnecker believes that a party is necessary for the ?political subject? which would provide political direction to the class struggle? and the anti-neoliberal bloc. Interestingly, she argues for a democratic centralism ? freedom in discussion and decisions but unity in action ? and rejects ?bureaucratic centralism?, which lacks democracy.3 However, despite the Bolsheviks having just such a democratic centralist party, she goes on to criticise the Latin American left for an ?acritical copying of the Bolshevik model of the party? arguing the need to get rid of the ?theoretical underpinnings of this model?4

In this spirit she argues for the loosening of party definitions of membership towards a libertarian-style ?network-type of organisation?. This, she argues, would allow for members who only want to be active now and then e.g. around elections. In addition, she argues that party members should be united around a ?cultural communion of values? and lifestyle that rejects consumerism.5 This means building an ?authentic national culture? incorporating indigenous customs and rejecting imports such as Halloween and Disney!6

This all starts to look quite different from democratic centralism let alone the Russian Bolsheviks. Karl Marx, V.I. Lenin and Trotsky all argued that the essential building block of the party was not a nebulous set of cultural values but a political programme ? which party members agreed to fight for as the key criterion of membership. The need for both democracy and centralism follows from this foundation.

Harnecker accuses Bolshevism of having a tendency to ?workerism?, ?hegemonism?, ?vanguardism? ? with the latter erroneously focused on overthrowing the capitalist state. Of these, the charge of workerism is the most interesting in that it forgets the Bolsheviks led a workers? revolution in a country whose population was 80% made up of peasants! They were won to the side of the Bolsheviks by the promise of an Agrarian revolution.

What was essential for the Bolsheviks was that they saw themselves as fighting to win the Russian masses to their

political programme ? that is, leading them towards the goal of working class power. It is this that Harnecker ultimately rejects. She paints an idealised picture of diverse movements interacting autonomously within an anti-neoliberal bloc and ignores the fact that such movements will always have a political leadership and programme, even if this is concealed behind libertarian language.

Just as Harnecker takes democratic centralism and moulds it into something quite different, so too she takes up Lenin's theory of socialist consciousness. Lenin argued, and Harnecker agrees, that socialist consciousness is brought into the working class ?from without? by the party.⁷ However, it is because Harnecker does not believe the party should fight for its socialist programme amongst the class that she turns socialist ideas into an abstract science, detached from working class struggles.

For Harnecker socialist consciousness is simply a critique of capitalism and ?a proposal for an alternative society to do away with it?. This is true enough, but it tells you nothing about how revolutionary socialist consciousness can be concretised into a set of demands, which seek to turn everyday struggles into a struggle for power. This is what Trotsky argued was the quintessence of the transitional programme. Harnecker, in contradistinction to Trotsky, is guilty of turning socialist consciousness into something that is disconnected from the actual struggles of workers. In short, she fails to see the revolutionary unity between theory and practice.

In presenting socialist consciousness in such abstract terms, Harnecker lays the basis for arguing for a minimum programme. She argues the task of the day is ?designing a project that is an alternative to capitalism? a national alternative programme which acts as a glue for the most disparate popular sectors? the broadest spectrum of the masses? made up of broad goals or slogans that everyone agrees on. She admits that this is a ?minimum programme?, i.e. a programme of reforms within capitalism that is forever severed from the ?maximum programme? of socialist revolution. For all reformists, socialism is always a ?nice idea for the future?, rather than something that must be fought for in every struggle of the working class and poor today.

?Making the impossible possible?

Harnecker does recognise that the party at some point needs a link, which can shift the struggles of today into the struggle for socialism and revolution: what she calls ?the art of making the impossible possible?. For her the key transformative link is ?popular participation governments? where the focus is ?a way of governing which, above all, delegates power to the people?. Thus the Left is a party of government and party of struggle simultaneously.⁸

As an example of this process she chooses the participatory budgets pioneered by the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) in Porto Alegre, which she calls ?the key to participation and politicisation?. The problem with these ?participatory? institutions is that they are not actual instruments of popular power. The budgets and framework for decisions are always set at the discretion of government bureaucrats. This has led in Brazil to ?participatory democracy? managing neoliberalism's austerity budgets ? choosing what to cut and what to save. One upshot of this has been playing off consumers against public sector workers. There have even been tripartite (cross-class) commissions of workers, management and popular movements to try and make the workers more responsible, with the hope of turning them into ?staunch allies for raising taxes and generally improving the municipality's revenues. As services improve, people will be more willing to pay taxes.? Harnecker supports this and insists that popular assemblies that do not acknowledge the fiscal responsibilities of the new ?Left? government and draw up a list of requests that exceed the municipality's ability to deliver, should be re-educated to recognise the present limits imposed by capitalism!⁹

In a few pages Harnecker has skillfully managed to redraft the arguments of the ?reasonable? bourgeoisie in the language of Marxism. In doing so, she forgets that Marxists have a simple response to the pleas of bourgeois democratic states that they ?can't afford? the workers demands: take the money from the rich and big business, open the books of those who claim they can't afford the workers' demands, nationalise the big companies without compensation, and place them under working class control. This strategy seeks to turn the struggles for immediate demands, into the fight for socialism and Harnecker's ?politicisation? goes in the opposite direction: asking the working class to scale down its demands!

Harnecker states that the social movements act like a 'pressure group' for a Left government until we can 'change the correlation of forces so we can make possible tomorrow what appears impossible at present'.¹⁰ She supports Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution and points to the Communal Councils Act passed on 9 April 2006 as creatively organising the community, along with various Misiones to teach self-management and extend cooperatives. She asks: 'can we say that there is no revolutionary process in Venezuela when the popular sectors are transforming themselves into the true protagonists of history in that process and the government is creating the foundations for a new state that is built from below'?'¹¹

The popular mobilisation of the workers and poor in Venezuela offers a great opportunity for socialist revolution in the 21st century. The reforms of Chávez certainly appear to stand out in a period of neoliberalism as an economic alternative based on social justice and redistribution.¹² But is he laying the foundations for a new state? The situation in Venezuela is deep in contradictions. Chávez lacks the support of much of the country's ruling class and continues to stand at the head of a state filled with conservative elements 'in the police, army and judiciary' that want him out. The latter is why Chávez has established the Misiones et al outside the structures of the existing state, hoping they will act as a force to secure his own power in the event of a coup or putsch.¹³

In this situation the working class must struggle to complete the revolution 'smash the bourgeois state, expropriate the capitalists and establish a new state based on working class democracy, like the soviets in Russia in 1905 and 1917. This means fighting for the working class to break with the capitalists and not constitute an 'anti-neoliberal bloc' alongside them. It is telling that despite mentioning now and again in passing the word revolution, nowhere does she elaborate how a socialist revolution would come about from her long process of developing participatory democracy, what the revolution would look like, or how it would work.

Reformism and the State

Marxists understand reformism as an ideology that argues socialism will be achieved through a series of parliamentary reforms. Attachment to parliamentary democracy is the chief characteristic of reformist parties, as they deny that the liberal democratic state is a facade that conceals the actual domination of capital. The permanent apparatus of the capitalist state 'police, army, judiciary' will ultimately be harnessed in defence of capitalism when it finds itself threatened. There can be no parliamentary road to socialism, as a revolution is needed to smash the capitalist state and put power in the hands of the workers.

As Rosa Luxemburg argued, reformists therefore do not advocate a different route, but actually a different goal, as they argue for accommodation with the existing system. It is precisely because of their accommodation with the system that reformist parties will often become integrated into state structures and base themselves on more privileged sections of workers.

It would make sense then that to justify her political project Harnecker would revise the Marxist theory of reformism and the state 'and sure enough this is what she does, although she denies it. Harnecker argues that 'we are at the beginning of a long process' and, by distinguishing between different 'forms' of capitalist state, she hopes to show that Marxists believe the state can be used as an instrument for social transformation:

'This is why the Marxist distinction between the type of state and form of government is so important. The type of state responds to the question: whose interests (or the interests of which class) does this state serve? The form of government answers a different question: how are those interests served: through a dictatorial regime or through one of the many varieties of democratic regime? It is important to understand that when the classic texts refer to 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' they're thinking about a kind of state and not a form of government. Furthermore, they are thinking about the type of state in a developed capitalist society which is moving towards socialism? perhaps the best way to avoid confusion without renouncing the Marxist concept of the state (which maintains that the state is not neutral, but obeys the interests of a certain class) is to refer to a state where the bourgeoisie has hegemony or one where the people have hegemony.'¹⁴

It is typical of Harnecker that she asserts a classical account of the state as an instrument of class rule in the abstract,

only to then discard this foundation by asserting the primacy of different categories – namely, the ‘hegemony’ of the people or not in both the form and type of state. It is self-evident that democratic structures and rights are progressive, particularly because they grant the working class freedom to organise and struggle. However, they also play an important role in disguising the oppressive and exploitative domination of capitalism and they bring together the privileged, coercive forces (police, army, judiciary) that will ultimately defend capitalism from overthrow. It is simply confused and inconsistent to claim, as Harnecker does, that the state expresses the interests of a certain class and may also, because of its ‘type’, give the people hegemony.

In addition, Harnecker ignores the role of the capitalist state as a regulator of the market economy. This legitimising function of the state is reproduced in popular discourse on a daily basis. The primary responsibility of government is economic growth – whether the benefits accrue to the rich or not. Left reformist governments have to limit their programme to one that will not inhibit economic growth. To ask for the government not to ‘legitimise capitalism’ is asking for a utopia – and sits uncomfortably with her appeal to workers to know the limits of capitalism!

Harnecker’s whole political trajectory is orientated to the ‘democratic form’ and this leads her to focus on participatory democratic structures that ‘supplement’ the state – rather than the organs of working class democracy that can lay the basis for a new type of workers’ state. This is why she makes the Bolivarian circles the starting point for her ‘project of transformation’, rather than the proto-soviet popular assemblies and co-ordinations such as the APPO in Oaxaca (Mexico) or the Fejuve in the El Alto water and gas ‘wars’ (Bolivia).

In addition, the idea that there is a long process is clearly wrong. In Bolivia in 2003 and then 2005, a nation-wide general strike paralysed the country, uprisings in key cities expelled the armed forces and began to tear apart the discipline of the army, presidents were ousted, and the road was open for the masses to power. It was their leadership – with ideas much like those of Harnecker – that held them back and turned the masses towards a parliamentary road and away from a final confrontation with capitalism itself.

Other examples are the Sandinista Revolution of 1979 or the long bloody stalemate of the FMLN in El Salvador throughout the 1980s. In both cases the Stalinists adopted a popular front strategy, based on an alliance with capitalist forces and left-wing elements of the Church, and refused to struggle for working class power. In these situations working class power was a real opportunity. However, it is Harnecker’s reformist ideas that block her from seeing the revolutionary potential in these struggles and commit her to a ‘long process’ – not only that, it is precisely such ideas that led to the failure of these struggles in the first place.

Resignation or revolution?

In Rebuilding the Left Harnecker has not broken with the fundamental assumptions of 20th century Stalinism: namely, that the revolution should proceed in ‘stages’, first with the popular front, then with social reform, and some time later, we might hope, socialism itself.

She does not learn the key lessons of the Latin American left in the last fifty years. In the struggles led by the Stalinist guerrilla popular fronts in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the Allende government and today with Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, she adopts the same popular frontist, stagist strategy. Thus, her answer to why the struggles of the last fifty years did not realise global revolution and socialism, is that it simply wasn’t possible; such were the external pressures and dynamics.

In an earlier work she elaborates her support for the popular front strategy, stating that one of the great successes of the FMLN in El Salvador and of the Nicaraguan Sandinista regime was receiving (token) support from European imperialism against the US counter-revolutionary repression.¹⁵ This ‘impossibility’ of revolution stretches at least as far back as her first and formative experience of a revolutionary situation, under the Allende government in Chile in the early 1970s, where she states, ‘the leadership of Popular Unity Coalition and President Allende himself understood quite well that the Chilean process could not succeed without the support of the armed forces.’¹⁶

It is because Harnecker divorces theory from revolutionary practice and strategy, that her answers to why these revolutions failed are ultimately objectivist and empirical. Her method focuses on an empirical analysis of a particular state or regime, the constraints of capitalist social relations and the pressures of the imperialist world system ? to conclude that the ?balance of power? was not for revolutionary change. As Trotsky noted, if those preaching the ?balance of power? thesis in Russia 1917 had won the day, there would have been no revolution.¹⁷

Harnecker?s approach is not only reformist, but also tails the politics of those forces leading struggles in Latin America in the last fifty years, such as Allende, the Sandinistas, Chávez, and the Zapatistas. It is because she tails the politics each of these forces opportunistically, rather than subjecting them to criticism, that her conception of ?the Left? is highly nebulous. It is for her a catch-all term including neoliberal governments such as Lula in Brazil right through to guerrilla movements in armed struggle like the FARC in Colombia. Harnecker is able to group these together because she does not analyse the political forces systematically, classify them by their different programmes or analyse their actual successes or failures.

This means she cannot draw balance sheet of the historical errors and defeats of the Latin American left, vital to informing revolutionary strategy today. Her own reformist politics stand in the way of this. The effect of this is ultimately a fatalistic attitude to the defeats of the last fifty years ? appealing to the ?balance of forces? as an excuse for the failure of reformist and Stalinist leaderships to lead a conquest of power. The effect of this, we argue, is that for Harnecker ?making the impossible possible? has never been? well? possible.

[b]Conclusion

In *Rebuilding the Left*, Marta Harnecker poses as a Marxist but her account is an attack on the core foundations of Marxist theory and practice: the centrality of the working class, the struggle for power, revolutionary programme and class independence are all dispensed with.

It is telling that her book is filled with references to non-Marxists such as Hardt and Negri, Stalinist writers like Ché Guevara and Fidel Castro, nationalist figures like José Martí, and an eclectic mix of academics, writers and activists. In a process of selective quoting she seeks to give a Marxist gloss to prevalent, muddle-headed reformist ideas. It is equally telling that the revolutionary activist and thinker who developed key aspects of the Communist programme in struggle with Stalinism, Leon Trotsky, does not get a look in!

The problem with the Latin American left is not that it does not adhere to Harnecker?s ideas but rather that it fundamentally always has and still does. We believe that a serious critique of the methods and programme of Stalinism¹⁸ is essential in opening the road to the re-elaboration of a revolutionary programme and a prerequisite for rebuilding revolutionary parties around the world as part of a revolutionary International.

This is an urgent necessity if the new, vibrant movements that have arisen across the Latin American continent are to succeed in creating a Socialist United States of Latin America.

Endnotes

1 pp32, 44 in? *Rebuilding the Left?*, Marta Harnecker, Zed Books 2007

2 p35, Harnecker

3 p46, Harnecker

4 p2, Harnecker

5 p100, Harnecker

6 pp98, 103, Harnecker

7 p. 29, ?What Is To Be Done??, Lenin, Progress Publishers 1978. For a critique of a typical left rejection of this and defence of Lenin?s idea, see ?What is to be done? the question economism can?t answer? p. 30 in ?The Politics of the Socialist Workers Party: A Trotskyist Critique? by Workers Power; available online at

<http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?id=105,539,0,0,1,0> [1]

8 p. 135, Harnecker

9 pp. 123-6, Harnecker

10 p. 69, Harnecker

11 p. 151, Harnecker

12 It should also be noted that the reforms are only sustained or 'affordable' for the domestic capitalist economy because of the high price of oil in the global market and Venezuela's large oil reserves (the fourth largest globally).

13 For an account of Chavez and his popular initiatives including the communal councils, see 'Hugo Chavez: Leading a Socialist Revolution?' by Simon Hardy, in Fifth International Volume 2, Issue 2, Winter 2007; available online at <http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?id=237,983,0,0,1,0> [2]

14 p. 96, Harnecker

15 For an alternative account of the limits and betrayals of the Sandinistas in power, see 'Nicaragua under the Sandinistas?', Permanent Revolution 7, Spring 1988; available online at <http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?id=65,248,0,0,1,0> [3]

16 ibid, p24

17 The Lessons of October, Leon Trotsky - <http://www.marxist.com/classics/trotsky/lessonssoct.html> [4]

18 The Degenerated Revolution: the origin and nature of the Stalinist States: available at <http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?id=86,564,0,0,1,0> [5]

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[3] <http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?id=65,248,0,0,1,0>

[4] <http://www.marxist.com/classics/trotsky/lessonssoct.html>

[5] <http://www.fifthinternational.org/index.php?id=86,564,0,0,1,0>