

Gabriel Hetland, *Democracy on The Ground: Local Politics in Latin America's Left Turn*

(Colombia University Press, 2023, 307 pp.)

Matthew Doyle

University College London

Gabriel Hetland's timely book seeks to analyse the factors which explain the success and failure to implement forms of local participatory direct democracy among two of the more radical Latin American 'Pink Tide' Left reformist administrations: Venezuela and Bolivia. This important intervention arrives at a point in which Latin America's Left turn has reached a series of impasses and faced a counter-movement of authoritarian conservatism, while nations worldwide are witnessing democratic backsliding, rising illiberal populism and a loss of faith in liberal-democratic political institutions. In this context, Hetland's book is a well-researched and methodologically novel examination of the conditions under which it is possible to extend and deepen democracy.

*Democracy on The Ground* draws on comparative ethnographic case studies of local government in four cities across Venezuela and Bolivia. The administrations of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia are often viewed as comparably radical, with similar projects of reform that seek to include ordinary people in the direct planning and administration of local government through mechanisms such as popular assemblies, participatory budgeting and grassroots planning processes. Nonetheless, Hetland argues that key differences in the way these regimes arrived to power and consolidated it once in office crucially affected how reforms played out on the ground. Hugo Chavez and the 'Fifth Republic Movement' (MVR) came to power as a result of an 'involutionary crisis' in which the existing political order disintegrated from above, while Evo Morales and the 'Movement for Socialism' (MAS) are an example of a 'movement-left regime' that came to power at the head of a powerful coalition of social movements which overthrew the existing regime from the bottom up. Without the support of a strong and autonomous civil society and faced with a significant backlash from Venezuelan elites, Chavez and the MVR opted to mobilize popular sectors, in an example of what Hetland terms 'left-populist hegemony'. Meanwhile, Morales and the MAS could count on the support of the highly organized Bolivian indigenous and urban poor and instead implemented 'passive revolution', through seeking an accommodation with regional and transnational elites and controlling and demobilizing the social movements which had originally brought them to power. While Morales sought to limit the expression of popular demands, Chavez sought to expand the power of popular sectors and made the ideas of direct democracy and popular sovereignty hegemonic: meaning that parties of the right and elite social groups had to adopt the language, values and practices espoused by the government.

Hetland performed extensive fieldwork of between three and five months in each of the cities of Torres and Sucre in Venezuela and Santa Cruz and El Alto in Bolivia, observing the implementation of participatory democratic processes and carrying out semi-structured

interviews with politicians, civil servants and local people. The book's two sections provide detailed summaries of the social and political history of each country before moving to a qualitative description of local politics and participatory democratic reform in the localized studies. While it is impossible to adequately summarize the rich ethnographic material presented here, Hetland does an admirable job of outlining local sociopolitical complexities while moving between the macro and micro scales of analysis. Drawing on four case studies, he creates a typology of 'urban regimes' which form a continuum of more or less democratic and effective forms of local participatory democracy. Hetland's central argument is that a city's regime type is primarily determined by its balance of class forces and the country's national governmental regime, thus explaining similarities and differences between each of the cities and the fact that Venezuela has demonstrated greater overall success in instituting democratic reform at the local level.

Hetland sustains that his study provides a compelling counter-example to refute the prevailing consensus among political scientists that democracy is only possible when made 'safe' for elites: when there exists a strong but moderate left political force which organizes subordinate classes while limiting the expression of their demands, alongside the existence of powerful conservative political parties which channel and defend elite interests within the political arena. Instead, Hetland argues, if left political forces are able to establish their own hegemony, this obliges right-wing parties and social elites to 'play the game' of politics on the Left's terms. The effect is to transform the terrain of politics and permanently establish ideas of popular power which go beyond the narrow and limited version of democracy embodied by conventional liberal-democratic consensus. While this argument is persuasive and interesting, it could have been developed further. It is only in the final pages of the book that Hetland begins to explore the broader implications of his analysis for political strategy and the future of the Left in Latin America and beyond, including a discussion of the 'statist trap' faced by ruling parties and the failure of Pink Tide administrations to achieve a transition to democratic socialism.

Nevertheless, this remains a detailed, fascinating and meticulously researched piece of work which uses qualitative comparison of the particularities of local and national politics and specific iterations of democracy on the ground, to theorize the conditions which produce effective local democracy. Hetland writes in clear and concise prose while accurately conveying a sense of the lived realities of everyday politics. It is therefore a book which will be of interest not only to scholars of the Latin American Left but to all readers interested in radical reform and the future of democracy.