

## Review

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Gerardo Necochea Gracia and Patricia Pensado Leglise, eds. *Voltear el mundo de cabeza. Historias de militancia de izquierda en América Latina*. Imago Mundi, Argentina, 2011, 344pp. ISBN: 978-950-793-092-8

*Voltear el mundo de cabeza* (To turn the world upside down) is both attractive and engaging. After reading each interview, one would like to keep on asking questions to the narrator. The book presents the work of a group of Latin American historians who intended to put together diverse voices in order to express the personal experiences of political activists, highlighting the complexity of individuals who became committed to left-wing organizations and movements in Latin America. The premise behind the effort was that life experience is key to understanding the influence of socialist thought on the continent.

The eight edited interviews included in the book tell the story of the political opposition to authoritarian regimes in the second half of the twentieth century. The interviews inquire into the origin of the interviewees' involvement in politics. The men and women interviewed were born between 1940 and 1955, and entered various Left organizations through the sixties, seventies and eighties. The interviews also inquire into the everyday life in those organizations. A picture emerges that is anything but homogenous: Those interviewed adhered to various political lines and their points of view differ and on occasion are antagonistic; the one common factor was their socialist ideology even though the meaning of it may have been different for each.

The life stories coincide in neither time nor space, nor in the way chosen to carry out militancy. And yet, together, they tell the story of an epoch in which, according to the authors, the sense of existence was profoundly linked to the need to change an established order responsible for brutal inequalities, oppression, decaying institutions, and inexistent or ineffective ways of democratic political participation. Individuals, for these reasons, thought it necessary to transform society and bring about socialism. Individual testimonies show how these ideas from the left contributed to the struggle for democracy, and share responsibility for the social and political transformations occurring today.

The first two oral history interviews were done by Gilma Romero Arrechavala. She interviewed two women members of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), in Nicaragua. Olga Avilés was very young when she joined the Sandinista underground. She was the daughter of a well-off family, related to Augusto C. Sandino; she came in contact with the FSLN while she was

a university student, and kept close ties after she became a teacher. She took part in actions to expropriate money, obtain weapons and establishing safety houses. She spent many years as head of all FSLN information. The other woman interviewed, Gladys Baéz, participated in one of the first FSLN armed fronts, in Pancasan, in 1967. At the time of the interview, 2007, she was a deputy at the National Assembly. She grew up in a working-class family and founded the first trade union in her home-town, Juigalpa.

Marieta de Moraes and Alexandre Fortes offer two of the interviews she carried out with Brazilian political activists. Avelino Ganzer was a leading force in the organization of rural workers in Santarem, in the Amazonia. He was among the first to come settle this region; his family moved from the south while the Transamazonic Highway was under construction. He occupied various political posts, first in the Rural Workers Union and then in various state agricultural agencies. He joined the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT), eventually was a member of the national leadership and ran for senator in 1986. His story tells of the difficulties encountered in settling the Amazonia and his growing awareness of left-wing politics.

The interview with Benedita da Silva is moving: She is a black woman who grew up in a favela in Rio and joined the Workers' Party in the initial stages of its organization. She began a political career when she was elected to the Municipal Council of Rio de Janeiro in 1982, the first black woman in that post. She went on to other posts, including federal deputy, and finally she became the first black woman to head a state government in Brazil. She opposed racism and xenophobia, fought for the rights of women, blacks, Indians, and other minorities. She was responsible, for instance, for legislation protecting the labour rights of domestic workers.

Pablo Pozzi, an Argentine historian, carried out two very interesting interviews with surviving members of the Revolutionary Workers' Party – People's Revolutionary Army (PRT-EPR). He interviewed Héctor Romero, a worker, son of workers, and whose mother was a founder and leading figure of the PRT in the San José Sugar Mill, in Tucumán. Hector explains, his speech full of local colour, how becoming a guerrilla was entangled with family, friends, and indeed the whole town's population, closely linked to local culture and traditions. For him it was something natural, the product of a feeling cultivated through several generations of a working-class family. The second interview, conducted with Silvia, reveals the everyday life of a woman in the underground. Silvia, because she came from a poor family, refers to racism and discrimination; but she also speaks of how she dealt with motherhood while carrying on armed struggle. It is noteworthy that, in her own words, she enters the struggle "on behalf of the next generation" while at the same time she is forced to expose her little daughter to deadly dangerous situations.

Gerardo Necochea interviewed Edna Ovalle. She grew up in northern Mexico, and was quite young when she became involved in politics, particularly alongside steel workers. Given the repression and hardening of State policies, Edna decided to join a clandestine armed communist group. Her story, important in itself, points to matters little studied in recent Mexican history.

The last interview in the book was done by Patricia Pensado Leglise. Unlike the others in the book, she interviewed an important left-wing Mexican intellectual. Adolfo Sánchez Rebolledo was neither active in armed groups or in electoral politics, instead, his militancy was in intellectual work. Consequently, the interview is more of a theoretical reflection than an action story. The evident close relationship between interviewer and interviewee creates an atmosphere of intimacy and familiarity that lends itself to such reflective practice. The published interview is a selection from 114 hours of recorded conversation. The interview presents a vision of the Mexican left encompassing the whole second half of the twentieth century. It includes, among other things, very insightful views on identity and Spanish exiles and their offspring.

The interviews, although focused on the experience of militancy, touch upon a number of related topics. One of them, for instance, is the role played by the Catholic Church, particularly by Liberation Theology and the *comunidades eclesiales de base*. Another and quite important subject has to do with who was destined to carry out revolution, which in most Latin American cases did not coincide with textbook definitions: besides a small working class, there were peasants, students and even progressive sectors of the bourgeoisie. The stories also refer to machismo, to the difficulties women had to overcome in order to study, to the role of trade unions in social movements, to family relationships and how sometimes they helped and sometimes they obstructed political militancy.

The authors consider that despite the wealth of studies on revolutions, peasant and labour movements in Latin America, there are no in-depth studies of the Left in them, even though it was central to many of those movements. The problem may stem from the difficulty in defining what Left is. This book takes the view that there have been multiple tendencies within the Left, so that belonging to it “is a process implying historical and personal changes, individuals and organizations that were at one point in the Left, may later not be and vice versa, influenced perhaps by the changes resulting from national and international conjunctures.” According to the authors, taking subjectivity into account and knowing how individuals embraced political commitments contribute to an understanding of how under certain circumstances, certain social movements take root. Also, such knowledge contributes to understanding how militancy itself was constitutive of social subjects who constructed new meanings for existing cultural symbols.

The introduction offers a historical sequence of the Left in Latin America. It puts forth three great periods: origins, from 1880 to 1920, the old Left, from 1930 to 1960, and the New Left, from the 1960s on. The introduction, in my opinion, is perhaps the least accomplished part of the book. Although full of interesting information, it is unnecessary for understanding the book, most particularly the description of the first two periods. The concluding chapter compares the narratives, analyzing and contextualizing them in a rather interesting and relevant manner, accounting for historical as well as geographical, cultural and ideological matters. The authors consider that the intention of writing a comparative history is not fully achieved. In my view, the comparison they do make helps the reader to better understand the people who at the time decided for left-wing militancy, since it places them within the whole of ordinary people rather than as exceptional individuals who stood outside society. They were common people whose experiences led them to question the established order and consequently tried to stand the world on its head in order to make sense of it. The book includes a useful chronology of the Latin American Left, going from the assassination of Sandino in Nicaragua (1939) to the election of Lula in Brazil (2003).

Oral history, as shown in this book, is quite useful for the study of the Latin American Left in the second half of the twentieth century. It brings forth qualitative evidence on social and political involvement, everyday life and subjective aspects of different experiences, matters all that other historical approaches tend to leave out. After reading the book, it becomes clear how perspectives on what the future should be partly determine how memory is created and the past is told. I agree with the authors: These life stories are part of a common Latin American history that needs to be revalued so that it may contribute to present and future changes.