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Review/Reseña

Rothwell, Matthew D. *Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Chinese Revolution in Latin America*. Routledge studies in modern history, 10. New York: Routledge, 2012.

The Chinese in America

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We have long needed a book such as that which Matthew Rothwell provides in *Transpacific Revolutionaries*. His work on the important influence of Chinese maoists on Latin American revolutionary thought and action fills a significant gap in our understandings of Latin American marxism. His attention to south-south material flows and intellectual influences, together with a focus on Latin American agency, provides us with important methodological breakthroughs that take us well beyond Eurocentric Cold War-bound determinants for understanding the emergence of Latin American revolutions.

Rothwell's study of Latin American maoism is focused through the limited but well selected studies of Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia. While

they are only part of a much larger phenomenon, these three countries provide excellent examples of the range of influences that maoism played in Latin America. Several commonalities link these case studies. In the 1960s, many of these activists traveled to China (apparently with funds from the Chinese government). Rothwell notes that this travel played a key role in the “domestication” of maoism in Latin America, while at the same time providing these militants with legitimacy and authority that they could exercise on their return. Furthermore, these maoist influences should not be seen as China’s attempt to extend its imperial reach into Latin America, but rather something that was sought out and cultivated by Latin Americans themselves.

Rothwell begins with Mexico and famed labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano, who fortuitously attended a 1949 meeting of the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in Beijing shortly after the consolidation of the communist victory. Lombardo was drawn to the Chinese model because of its parallels with the Mexican Revolution. His initial contact led to a series of close contacts between Mexican leftists and Chinese revolutionaries in the 1960s. Perhaps most significant was Florencio Medrano’s attempts to emulate Mao’s strategies with a protracted people’s war in the border region between Oaxaca and Veracruz in the 1970s. Maoism’s continuing influence in Mexico is apparent in how subsequently political parties coopted their cadre and political influences.

Maoism’s strongest influence emerged in Peru’s Shining Path guerrilla insurgency. Particularly in Peru, maoism not only represented a schism from the pro-Soviet party, but also provided an arena of subsequent divisions between different maoist groups, of which the Shining Path was initially one of the smallest and most insignificant tendencies. Rothwell observes that many scholars fail to understand the emergence of the Shining Path as Latin America’s most powerful guerrilla insurgency because of a lack of expertise in the intricacies of maoist thought in China. He argues that the movement can only be properly understood within that context.

Debates have long raged on the left as to the nature of the influences of Peru’s famed marxist founder José Carlos Mariátegui on the thought of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzmán. Rothwell argues that while these influences represented more of an effort to

conceptualize Mariátegui's ideology in light of Mao's contributions than "a reworking of Mao in light of Mariátegui" (69), this process would not have happened had not Shining Path leaders understood a need to adapt maoism to Peruvian conditions rather than directly and mechanically importing these ideologies. In addition, Rothwell points to a creative process of everyday adaptation and domestication that took place when mid-level cadres read and interpreted Mao through their own processes of socialization in Peru.

Rothwell's third case study of Bolivia provides a counterpart to Peru, and a historical situation that seemingly would be more likely to provide a rich bed for the emergence of maoist thought. In particular, the Chinese example should have logically provided an appealing model after the 1952 MNR revolution. Nevertheless, as Rothwell points out, China becomes more of a point of reference than a model. Rothwell advances a geopolitical explanation of Juan Velasco's nationalist government providing more political space for activists in Peru than did Bolivia's more repressive military regimes as a partial explanation for different growth patterns, but one senses that a much deeper and more complicated story exists here. For example, a 1970 attempted uprising in Bolivia's eastern region repeated Che Guevara's failure three years earlier, but had several factors played out differently it might have grown into a massive uprising, while the Shining Path subsequently withered away into a minor historical footnote. This contrast highlights that history is not mechanically written, and many different possible outcomes exist. A larger point might underscore the roles humans play in determining a specific historical outcome.

In many ways, Rothwell only provides an introduction to the topic of maoist ideological influences on the Latin American left and his study suggests that more work needs to be done. For example, Bolivia is much more known for being one of the few places where trotskyism gained a strong foothold.¹ What were the interactions like between the maoists and trotskyists? Che Guevara was a notoriously heterodox ideologue, drawing on multiple influences but refusing to be identified

¹ The best work on trotskyism in Bolivia is S. Sándor John, *Bolivia's Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009). Also see Robert L. Smale, *"I Sweat the Flavor of Tin": Labor activism in early twentieth-century Bolivia*, Pitt Latin American series (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

with any one trend. In fact, guevarism came to be seen as yet one more political line in the ideologically fragmented 1960s. Despite a common peasant strategy, clear divisions emerged between Guevara's insurrectionist *foco* theory and Mao's prolonged peoples war, perhaps most visibly apparent in divisions within the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua in the 1970s. Rothwell's work suggests the need for deeper study of maoist influences on Guevara, and the influence Guevara had on the formation of maoist ideologies in Latin America.

Rothwell's study also references tantalizing details that might shed light on the diversity of the Latin American left. One minor example is a request by Peruvian and Ecuadorian delegates at a 1959 seminar in China for a study of national minorities. A study of the National Problem, of course, was a concern of Stalin's, and was introduced into Latin America in the 1920s as a defense of the rights of Indigenous nationalities. Pro-Soviet communist parties subsequently became renowned for their defense of Indigenous and African descendant peoples. China ignored the request for such a study at the 1959 seminar, and subsequently the Shining Path came under harsh criticism for ignoring the ethnic dimensions of their struggle. The Peruvian maoists were not alone in their shortcomings in this regard, as Rothwell points out that this was also an issue with the Bolivian maoist party. Perhaps this is part of a larger question connected to how different analyses of the national question divided the left, and we have failed to understand these dynamics due to our shortcomings of debates within maoism.

Considering the important but often unacknowledged influence of maoism in Latin America, Rothwell asks why exactly have maoists been ignored. He postulates four thought-provoking factors that contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the Latin American left. First is the common Cold War tendency among historians to focus on Europe to the exclusion of Asian and African influences, together with a tendency to deny political agency to Latin Americans. Just as significant, however, is a lack of knowledge of Chinese history and politics among Latin Americanists. Rothwell argues that if we had a stronger understanding of the intricacies of the evolution of maoism in China, its influences in Latin America would become clearer. Third is the revulsion among scholars against the level of violence that the

Shining Path insurgency engendered in Peru, which has hindered studies that might contribute to a deeper appreciation for maoist influences in Latin America. And, finally, Rothwell points to the weakness of China's current political influence in Latin America as hindering a historical analysis of maoism in the region.

Ironically, China now has a more visible and marked material presence in the region than ever before, but rather than contributing to a subversive ideology it has become part of the logic of capitalist-driven neo-extractivist economies. But even China's current role represents a continuation of part of its historical attraction for Latin America. Beginning with the 1949 revolution, some leftists saw maoism as a model for how to organize a successful guerrilla struggle that should be emulated in Latin America. For others, however, China's great leap forward provided a model for economic modernization that would allow for the development of Latin America's impoverished economies. It is that development model that has led leftist governments ranging from Cuba to Ecuador to pursue a significant warming of relations with China. Unfortunately, these contemporary leaders seem to ignore the fact that China's market-driven (read: capitalist) policies lead to rapidly rising rates of inequality that in part originally led to a push for a socialist revolution. It is in this context that we still have a lot to learn about maoist influences in Latin America. Rothwell's *Transpacific Revolutionaries* provides an excellent starting point.