Aimed primarily at university students, this collection of essays analyses the phenomenon of what the authors call the “radical democratic Latin American Left in power”. Used interchangeably with “twenty-first century socialism”, this term refers primarily to the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, the main focus of the book, although other countries (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cuba) are also discussed. The book offers some useful and varied insights into the complex dynamics of a rapidly-changing region, yet it suffers from some important limitations in terms of framing, quality of analysis, structure, accessibility, and engagement with contemporary political realities and debates in Latin America.

Let me begin by noting the book’s strengths. First, by focusing on the challenges faced by current leftist regimes in Latin America, the book provides a valuable opportunity to look beyond the experiences of individual countries at the broader social, economic and political forces at play in the region. Comparative references to past experiments in socialism highlight the historical specificity and innovative features of current Latin American leftist governments. Particular emphasis is placed on their heterogeneity—for example, they tend to combine class-based and identity-based movements, economic pragmatism with social mobilization—and the tensions this gives rise to. Rather than merely critiquing gaps between state discourse and practice, as some accounts do, the book highlights the structural factors that condition the trajectories of
leftist governments. Finally, the book’s broad thematic focus—chapters cover topics ranging from state-social movement relations, to foreign policy negotiations, to local agrarian cooperatives—demonstrates the multiple sites and scales at which state-led projects of social transformation play out. All in all, readers of this book will gain a sense of the complex political, economic and socio-cultural realities of contemporary Latin America, as well as the dilemmas and challenges faced by the region’s leftist governments.

Notwithstanding these positive features, the book’s a priori classification of the governments in question as examples of “twenty-first century socialism” provides a rather narrow analytical framework for approaching such complexities. All too often, references to Marxist theory and earlier European (and Cuban) experiments in socialism replace essential historical background relating to country-specific dynamics of social struggle and state formation. For example, histories of indigenous struggle are hardly dealt with at all, despite their significant role in shaping the ascendancy, discourse and politics of leftist governments, at least in Bolivia and Ecuador. Recurring attempts to locate the countries discussed (and those excluded) on a spectrum from “radical” to “moderate” do little to account for the differences between them, or how their trajectories have shifted over time (a point I return to below).

A second issue relates to the book’s structure and coherence. Perhaps reflecting the fact that it was largely compiled from previously published academic journal articles, the four sections provide an awkward and seemingly post hoc organizing framework rather than a thoughtful guide through complex topics. This weak coherence is compounded by the variety of styles and quality of the chapters. While some are balanced, critical and empirically-grounded, others (for example, chapters 2 and 5) are
polemical, uncritical, and lacking in empirical substance. Similarly, while some are clearly written and accessible to a non-specialist audience, others fail to explain key terms and events cited, making them ill-suited as classroom texts. In light of this diversity, it is worth briefly surveying the sections and chapters of the book, which students and educators may wish to read selectively.

In the Introduction, Steve Ellner defines the “twenty-first century Latin American radical Left” as applicable to the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, in contrast to the “moderate leftist” regimes of Brazil, Argentina or Mexico. This typology is justified with reference to a list of shared characteristics of the former, which include economic pragmatism, political polarization and social mobilization. Ellner’s basic argument is that recent leftist regimes are more socially and ideologically heterogeneous than those of the past, which helps explain the complex challenges they face. Although this is a valuable observation, borne out by subsequent chapters, his efforts at classification—which are echoed by some other authors—appear strained and unhelpful, as well as potentially anachronistic in light of both Bolivia’s and Ecuador’s moves towards more moderate political trajectories (a point illustrated by Marc Becker’s chapter on Ecuador).

Ellner goes on to describe the heterogeneous social bases of current leftist governments, which he notes represent a departure from classical Marxist class politics. Aside from this discussion being rather dense and convoluted, his privileging of Western social movement theory obscures the fact that social struggles in Latin America have long combined “class” and “ethnic” elements. The final section of the Introduction introduces the “good-left/bad-left thesis”—the dichotomy drawn by Jorge Castañeda and other Latin American reactionary intellectuals between acceptable/moderate leftist
governments and those deemed too radical/populist/anti-American—which serves as a unifying theme and intellectual punch-bag for the remainder of the book. While it is surely important to contest such politically-charged stereotypes, contributors’ ad nauseam rejection of the “good-left/bad-left thesis” seems to diminish rather than enhance the level of political analysis on offer.

Section 1, “Theoretical, Historical and International Background”, begins with a chapter by Roger Burbach, which echoes the Introduction in emphasizing the multiplicity of movements involved in recent Latin American leftist experiments. Despite providing some useful information, this chapter provides insufficient explanation on historical context and key terms for a student readership. For example, we are told that “as the 1990s drew to a close…social struggles and popular rebellions ruptured” (p.32), but not why and in what conditions (the effects of neoliberal reforms are barely mentioned). Instead, Burbach quickly moves on to an account of Cuban socialism, which seems of limited relevance to the cases in question. The next chapter, by Diana Raby on Venezuela, offers an uncritical reading of state discourse, while providing little insight into social and political realities in the country. The section concludes with a chapter by Marcel Nelson on Venezuela’s negotiations over the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Contrasting with Raby’s account, Nelson combines a clear theoretical framework (Poulantzas’ work on the capitalist state) with a detailed empirical analysis of Venezuelan state policy on the FTAA, although the chapter sits awkwardly at the end of a dubiously-named “background” section.

Section 2, “The Twenty-first Century Radical Left in Power in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador”, contains chapters by Steve Ellner, Federico Fuentes and Marc Becker, which are again diverse in their themes, quality and style. Ellner focuses on state
expropriations in Chavez’s Venezuela as a long drawn-out “tug-of-war between the leftist government and the private sector” (p.76), and as a contest between the demands of workers, the middle classes and “non-incorporated sectors”. Although these class categories appear rather static and homogenized, the chapter offers valuable insight into the heterogeneous nature of the Chavista movement and the tensions this generates. Fuentes’ chapter on Bolivia lays bare intense debates on, and critiques from, the Left that have marked recent Bolivian politics. Yet, rather than exploring these tensions, Fuentes uses them to construct a straw man—the “new two-Left thesis”. This refers to critiques of Morales’ government as “reconstituted neoliberalism” or “neoextractivism”, strategically identified here with foreign scholarship, despite their prevalence in Bolivia. Fuentes rejects such accusations on the basis of Morales’ continuing popularity and the lack of viable leftist proposals for moving beyond an extractivist economy. In delegitimizing leftist critique, and glossing over growing rifts among Bolivian social movements (including the breakdown of the 2002 Peasant-Indigenous Unity Pact), Fuentes presents himself as a mere apologist for the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS–Movement Towards Socialism) government.

Marc Becker’s chapter on Correa’s government offers an interesting counterpoint. In a welcome departure from Fuentes or Raby, Becker defines “the Left” not as governments that deploy leftist discourse, but as the diverse social movements (including indigenous movements) that brought them to power and continue to pressure them with radical social demands. His succinct overview of recent tensions and debates in Ecuador—in particular those related to extractive industry development—illuminate the important and otherwise overlooked role of the environment as a terrain of conflict under Latin American leftist governments. Becker also notes that Correa’s clientelistic politics, and
his support for extractive industry and agribusiness interests, have alienated him from
many of his social movement bases, calling into question his “radical leftist” credentials.
In fact, many Bolivian leftist intellectuals would argue that the same can be said of
Morales—although this would hardly be evident to readers of this book.

The third section of the book, “Influences of the Twenty-first Century Radical
Left in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Cuba”, deals with countries occupying an ambiguous
positioning within Ellner’s “radical left”/“moderate left” typology. The first chapter, on
Nicaragua and El Salvador, becomes mired in this question of classification, producing a
list of “common traits” that is more descriptive than analytical. The next chapter, on
Cuba, provides valuable insight into the dilemmas facing Cubans today and the divergent
positions and proposals that exist regarding the country’s future. This draws on an
examination of public discourse and publications, giving the chapter a welcome empirical
grounding in national debates rather than leftist scholarship.

The final section of the book, “Economy, Society and Media”, contains three
chapters. The first, a rich empirical case study of Venezuela’s “social production
companies” by Thomas Purcell, provides details of how state distribution of oil rents has
failed to buttress the productivity of small agrarian cooperatives in a neglected sector of
Venezuela’s economy. The second, by George Ciccariello-Maher, takes issue with the
“good-left/bad-left thesis”—in particular, its “fetishization” of established institutions and
disregard for social struggles—by highlighting the dialectical relationship between social
struggles and constitutional processes in Venezuela. Although he picks an easy target for
critique, his insistence on seeing leftist governments as embedded in open-ended political
processes—which is precisely how many Bolivians view their “process of change”—
helpfully transcends a polarized debate about whether they are “socialist” or “neoliberal”.
In the final chapter, Kevin Young discusses how Latin American leftist governments have been portrayed in the US press and wider intellectual discourse, revealing the prevalence of the “good-left/bad-left” frame. Predictably, he goes on to contest such framings, although by this point his critiques have already been well-rehearsed.

As this overview highlights, the collection contains some valuable analysis, despite its varying quality, poor structure, analytical blind spots, and tendency for over-classification. More broadly, the book raises important questions about what a politically-engaged leftist analysis of Latin American processes of political and social change should look like. Does this imply a show of academic solidarity with leftist governments, “forming a united front…against common enemies” (p.120) as Fuentes urges? Or is the role of leftist critique—as other chapters seem to imply—to illuminate, through empirically-grounded analysis, the tensions and challenges faced by these governments and their movement bases? Could this even imply solidarity with groups facing new forms of violence and marginalization within leftist states? Or perhaps those writing from US or European universities should seek to amplify and engage the rich debates unfolding among the Latin American Left, thereby helping to redress the Eurocentric trajectory of leftist scholarship? (Some readers will feel this collection does too little to achieve this.)

The fact that the chapters in this volume offer different perspectives on these questions is a positive feature of the book. What is perhaps lacking is an editorial discussion that brings these dilemmas of political engagement and positionality to the fore. Such a discussion would not only have helped students make sense of, and engage critically with, the authors’ diverse perspectives, but would open up important questions about the role of leftist academic scholarship in contemporary processes of social and political change.