



Problems and Solutions in Latin America: A View from the Ground

BOOK REVIEW - *Savage Capitalism and the Myth of Democracy: Latin America in the Third Millennium*, by Michael Hogan

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Wednesday 20 January 2010, by colaborador@s-extern@s

- Bangor: Booklocker
- September 2009
- ISBN: 160145953X
- 226 pages, \$14.95
- Paperback.

With his latest book, *Savage Capitalism and the Myth of Democracy*, Michael Hogan takes his place among writers and analysts, such as Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Paul Krugman, and Amy Goodman, who analyze complex political, economic, cultural, and educational issues in the Americas and around the world. They are not politicians, not supporters of any particular party or movement. They are truth tellers in the Socratic tradition. They travel, study, write, research, and analyze. They make suggestions on how to improve education, governments, and economies so that they serve all people rather than just the wealthy elite. They are liberal in the traditional sense of that word and its associations with liberty, generosity, tolerance, and humanitarian reform.

Hogan has lived and worked as an educator and writer in Mexico for twenty years. He has written in many major genres, including poetry, fiction, essays, and history. One of his best known books, *The Irish Soldiers of Mexico*, brings to light, through painstaking research and analysis, a little known but telling episode during the Mexican American War when a group of Irish American soldiers deserted the American Army and went over to the Mexican side. Indeed, this book became the basis of a movie released in 1999, *One Man's Hero*, starring Tom Berenger. His latest book, *Savage Capitalism*, combines many of his prior interests with keen political and economic analysis based on his extensive knowledge of Latin America, much of it gleaned from personal, professional experience throughout this diverse region. Some of the most poignant passages in the book, such as the chapters on Central America, give detailed first-hand accounts of the poverty, gang violence, crime, and repression that haunt the streets and barrios of its principal cities.

Through historical analysis, he shows how these conditions have evolved over two hundred years. He shows how prisons and slums have become breeding grounds for large, powerful gangs on both sides of

the border. We see how crime, violence, and corrupt government are undermining and replacing the native traditions of order, decency, and self-sustaining industry. Other passages probe the intimate details, so often hidden from American view, of how inequities in the coffee trade directly affect thousands of workers in Colombia, keeping them burdened with backbreaking labor for very low wages. We learn how huge agri-businesses, fueled by unfair subsidies, have seriously damaged traditional agriculture and industry in Mexico, Brazil, Guatemala, Venezuela, and other Latin American countries. Through his detailed analysis of the role of the Catholic Church in countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, we come to share his deep, abiding disappointment in the failure of the Church bureaucracy to recognize and to support leaders of reform, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, who fought against the horrors of economic and military dictatorship in support of basic rights for all people.

The book is composed of chapters that can be read as freestanding essays with well defined focus, many of which have previously appeared in well known publications, such as *Monthly Review*, *Z Magazine*, and *Harvard Review*. Put together, they form a comprehensive view of major developments in the region in recent decades. Hogan's analysis is rooted in an understanding of history that includes local traditions as well as the powerful influence of the U.S., Europe, the Catholic Church, and multinational corporations. He points out the great potential these powers have had to participate in positive reform and how often they have supported instead military dictatorship, repression, and exploitation of people and the natural environment. The result has been huge profits for U.S. and European corporations and for the economic elite within Latin American countries. These profits have come at the expense of draining natural resources, have pushed wages below subsistence levels, and have left countless towns and villages bereft of the minimum resources needed to educate their children and to cover basic needs, such as nutrition and healthcare. As he points out, these conditions create instability, violence, and the threat of revolution. They force many to cross borders in search, not just of a better life, but of any life at all. As Hogan suggests, the solutions to these problems do not include more military and police crackdowns or further support for dictators and economic aristocracies.

Rather they include support for high quality education, local agriculture, true democratic reforms of political systems, and return of a fair measure of corporate profits to the people whose land and labor make them possible. He calls for morality, wisdom, and humanitarian concern for all people and respect for their cultures. In chapters such as "RX for Historical Entropy," he gives very practical advice and lists steps that the U.S. and Latin American governments can take to begin the process of reform necessary to repair decades of damage already done. As Noam Chomsky writes, Hogan's "lucid, thoughtful essays provide a valuable picture of Latin America from a point of view that is perceptive, often controversial, but always instructive."

Savage Capitalism is also an attack on ignorance. In the chapter entitled "A Cure for Historical Amnesia," Hogan illustrates how little most people in the U.S. know of the history of U.S. relations with Mexico and other Latin American countries. Instead of accurate historical accounts of how the U.S. took vast territories from Mexico through military force during the Mexican American War, they learn heroic myths in history books designed to advance the causes of nationalism and patriotism, not truth. He calls for honest, rigorous education that looks at all available information and presents a vision of truth that is closer to Homer's balanced analysis of the Trojan War in the *Iliad* than to the latest Rambo movie.

Hogan concludes his book with lines from the Mexican poet Jaime Sabines: "Otros saben las palabras del canto, nosotros cantamos". "Others know the words of the song, but we sing." *Savage Capitalism* is Michael Hogan's song, the latest of many, and in it we hear his voice—one imagines a clear, powerful Irish tenor. Readers concerned with the past, present, and future of the Americas will find this book to be timely and provocative. One also hopes that they will hear and respond to its call for the kinds of compassionate, intelligent reforms that ultimately serve the interests of all people and the natural environment that sustains them. He describes the green shoots of such reform that have already begun to sprout, but reminds us that they cannot grow, blossom, and bear fruit without support from the larger political and economic community.

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