

# SHAPING THE POLITICAL ARENA

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CRITICAL JUNCTURES, THE LABOR  
MOVEMENT, AND REGIME DYNAMICS  
IN LATIN AMERICA

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## *Preface to the 2002 Edition*

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THE UNIVERSITY of Notre Dame Press should be congratulated for its decision to reissue this remarkable book. *Shaping the Political Arena* follows the best Weberian tradition of historical political sociology, in several senses.

In one of these senses, which will be immediately obvious to the reader, this book displays encyclopedic knowledge and the skillful utilization of a huge and varied literature.

In a second sense, the Colliers have a broad—macro—and very important question: What were the patterns, and the consequences, of the incorporation of labor (basically, urban labor) into the national arenas of politics of Latin America?<sup>1</sup> The authors trace these consequences in relation both to labor and, no less importantly, to the overall characteristics of the political regimes and more generally of the societies that emerged during and after (and, as they show, partly as a result of) the political incorporation of labor in Latin America.

In a third sense, as Weber did, this book uses a rather wide array of causal factors without reducing its explanations to any of them. Yet this is not intellectually undisciplined eclecticism: these factors are carefully sorted out and assessed in each case and across cases.

Fourth, and related to the preceding remark, I found it particularly pleasurable, as I did in Weber's *Economy and Society*, to "watch" the authors of *Shaping the Political Arena* move in each step of their analysis with clear—and explicit—self-consciousness of their methodology. In many passages of their book, the Colliers do us the important service of pointing out what they believe are the scope, the possible robustness, and the likely limitations of their findings and arguments. In fact, I have found this methodological self-consciousness extremely useful both for my own work and for my teaching—it is nice, and indeed helpful, to watch very good minds carefully telling us about the rationale of the conceptual and empirical steps they are taking.

Fifth, because the Colliers have a theoretical framework backed by impressive research, they come out with a series of hypotheses and con-

<sup>1</sup> Always mindful of the need to offer clear definitions, the authors consider incorporation as the "first sustained and at least partially successful attempt by the state to legitimate and shape an institutionalized labor movement" (p. 161).

clusions that add enormously to our knowledge not only of labor but also of political processes—broadly understood—in Latin America.

A book of this scope and complexity invites various uses and readings. Mine, as implied above, is that of the study of a complex collective actor by means of a theoretical framework that moves both through time (tracing the history of the respective labor movements in eight countries) and by means of "horizontal" comparisons. The main comparisons are of cases that are paired by means of similarities in certain factors that the theory indicates as particularly relevant. Some of these pairings are counterintuitive, and certainly they would not have been generated had the questions posed been different from the ones of this book; for example, it took me some time and several discussions with the authors until I fully understood—and agreed with—the pairing of two cases, Brazil and Chile, that in many other respects are very different, as the Colliers themselves emphasize. Here, as usual in these procedures, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: as the reader will notice, these pairings highlight important similarities, both in the process of labor incorporation and in the overall consequences they generated. Furthermore, these procedures are disciplined by the innovative and conceptually powerful typologies that the authors elaborate on the relationships between the labor movement on one side, and the various kinds of incorporation effected by the state and political parties, on the other.

The book moves analytically back and forth between histories of each case, told in considerable detail and with remarkable knowledge, and comparisons that are apposite because they are anchored in similarities that are shown to be theoretically relevant and empirically useful. This, as noted above, is comparative historical (political) sociology at its best. It is extremely difficult and time consuming to do this well, and its product—the present book—well deserves the attentive reading it demands.

Notice what, in my reading (and, I take it, in the intention of the authors), this book accomplishes. To begin with, it deals with a most important fact in the history of modern politics: the constitution and eventual incorporation into the main political arenas of a major social actor, the working class, especially its urban segment. This class was not already "there," constituted as such before its political incorporation. It had, nonetheless, characteristics largely determined by social, economic, ideological, and political factors that long preceded its incorporation, and that show significant differences among the countries included in this study—hence the first comparative excursion of the book. In turn, these factors, interacting with elite strategies, heavily influenced the kinds—and the limits—of political incorporation of the working class, and in so doing defined the specific characteristics with which this class was constituted as an actor in the respective national political arenas. The periods in which these incorporations occurred are what the authors call *critical*

*junctures*, epochal times that transform important societal parameters and have long-standing reverberations—a concept that can be and has been fruitfully used by several authors in the study of other topics.

For the study of these critical junctures, the comparisons, now in terms of paired cases, are very helpful. As the authors persuasively show, in Latin America there were at least four patterns of labor incorporation: (1) the *radical populism* of Mexico and Venezuela; (2) the *labor populism* of Argentina and Peru; (3) the *electoral mobilization (of labor) by a traditional party* of Uruguay and Colombia; and (4) the pattern that at least in the initial period was more exclusionary, involving the *depolitization and control* effected in Brazil and Chile.<sup>2</sup> The Colliers further show, by going back to the history of each case and then returning to the four paired comparisons, that each mode of incorporation generated its own "legacy," disaggregated into the more or less immediate reactions to labor incorporation (the "aftermath") and its longer term "heritage." As they argue, and highlight in the title of their book, this flow of events has significantly contributed to "shaping the political arena" of these eight countries (which as a set contain a very large proportion of the Latin American population and territory). The incorporation of the working class into the national political arena—however precarious, subordinated, and controlled it was in most cases, and notwithstanding the reactions, sometimes repressive, it provoked—deeply influenced the politics and, indeed, the whole of society in these countries.<sup>3</sup> Even with its limitations—closely mapped in this book—this incorporation meant the end of oligarchic domination and of a predominantly agrarian society in these countries.

As this book makes clear in the reflections it includes under the heading of "Heritage," these events did not lead directly to democracy (rather, in some of these countries, they led to nasty authoritarian reactions). Consequently, among many other valuable contributions, this book shows that in Latin America the paths to democracy have been quite different from those traversed by the highly developed capitalist countries. The historical specificity of the Latin American paths to democracy is a topic that still needs much research. It is an important topic, both in its own right and because it should be a major explanatory factor of the characteristics—and failings—of contemporary democracy in this region. This is not the main focus of this book. Yet, as Weber did with his work, the present study illuminates and opens up areas of inquiry that are not central to its purpose, furnishes knowledge that is extremely relevant to those

<sup>2</sup> I use, in italics, the terms used by the authors.

<sup>3</sup> The authors summarize nicely their approach when they point out that their work "builds upon an analysis of the dialectical interplay between labor control and labor mobilization" (p. 745).

areas, and shows in an exemplary way how a theoretically guided and methodologically self-conscious approach may be used in dealing with some broad—and extremely important—issues.<sup>4</sup>

Writing this preface in 2002, I cannot avoid an additional note. In Latin America, the social actor this book traces—the working class, especially its urban segment—never achieved full political incorporation, understanding by this a broadly accepted and properly represented location in the circuits of political, economic, and social power. Furthermore, in most of our countries, the ravages of economic and social crises and policies, under both authoritarian and democratic rule, have significantly diminished the absolute and relative weight of the working class. Still, it is very hard to imagine a democratic future (other than a rather perversely updated version of oligarchic rule) without a vigorous presence of the working class in what this book calls “the political arena.” Whether this kind of presence is still possible, and in what ways, is a major question for the answer to which this study, beyond its great intrinsic interest, provides indispensable historical, theoretical, and methodological background.

<sup>4</sup> As the authors properly note, “Obviously, the argument is *not* that labor politics and state-labor relations can, by themselves, explain broader patterns of change. Rather, the focus on these issues provides an optic through which a larger panorama of change can be assessed and, in part, explained” (p. 745, italics added).