

Journal of Latin American Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/LAS>

Additional services for *Journal of Latin American Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Victor Figueroa Clark, *Salvador Allende: Revolutionary Democrat* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), pp. x + 164, £12.99, pb.

RICARDO GAMBOA

Journal of Latin American Studies / Volume 47 / Issue 03 / August 2015, pp 620 - 621
DOI: 10.1017/S0022216X15000590, Published online: 03 July 2015

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022216X15000590

How to cite this article:

RICARDO GAMBOA (2015). Journal of Latin American Studies, 47, pp 620-621
doi:10.1017/S0022216X15000590

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 47 (2015). doi:10.1017/S0022216X15000590

Victor Figueroa Clark, *Salvador Allende: Revolutionary Democrat* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), pp. x + 164, £12.99, pb.

This book is a political biography which offers a detailed portrait of Salvador Allende, one of Chile's most important political leaders of the twentieth century. It fulfils two main objectives. The first is to recount the origins of Allende's political engagement, the major milestones of his career, and his role as a political leader. His political thought, and its relevance today, is also addressed. The book also improves our understanding of Chilean politics between 1930 and the coup of 1973, by providing a wealth of information and analysis of the principal political events of the period.

The author has clearly carried out exhaustive research of his subject: each chapter is well documented, drawing on various sources which are well and coherently woven together. In this regard the book makes various significant contributions. First, in analysing Allende's political activities it is interesting to see how certain issues became part of the public agenda, how a range of political actors positioned themselves with regard to those issues, and the factors that influenced their eventual outcomes. Important topics dealt with in this way include the nationalisation of the copper industry and the so-called 'Damned Law', *Ley Maldita*, passed in 1948 to outlaw the Communist Party. A second and perhaps greater contribution comes when the book describes and explains certain internal dynamics of the Left, and the relationship between the Left and the centrist Christian Democrats. Here, the book provides a good treatment of experiences including the formation of the Popular Front coalition, various moments of division and reunification of the Socialist Party, and the emergence of left-wing coalitions the Front for Popular Action (Frente de Acción Popular, FRAP), in 1957, and Popular Unity (Unidad Popular, UP) in 1969. The tense and difficult relationship between socialists and communists is also particularly well dealt with. All of this makes it a book that stands alongside previous works by Jorge Arrate and Eduardo Rojas, or Julio Jobet, as required reading for anyone who wants to understand the development of the Chilean Left.

The book's middle chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), dealing with the aftermath of the 1958 elections and the UP's experience in government, are particularly worthy of note. On one hand the author makes a laudable effort to explain the importance of the international context for understanding fully what was happening in Chilean politics, particularly on the Left, and in the various, ultimately unsuccessful, attempts at *rapprochement* between left-wing coalitions and the Christian Democrat party. This is particularly praiseworthy as, in contrast to various other treatments that exist, the author clearly shows how the Chilean political process was influenced by the strategic considerations and foreign policy actions of external powers. On the other hand, we are offered a detailed account of the UP government, covering its objectives, strategy, development and the actors and elements that influenced its tragic end. In this respect the treatment of the difficulties faced by Allende in trying to maintain cohesion within his own coalition, internally divided about strategy, is of particular interest.

Thus the book is an interesting political biography in which the author takes Allende's political life, and its trajectory over time, as a starting point for forming a better appreciation of Chilean politics past and present. The pursuit of this aim is however the root cause of the book's two main weaknesses.

First, while the structure of the book is unobjectionable in itself, it takes a highly uncritical stance with regard to Allende's leadership, to the point where the book's main achievements are weakened. This is best exemplified in the treatment of

differences within the Socialist Party, and within the UP, about the path that the socialist revolution should take. It is noticeable that the responsibility for the consequences of the failure to resolve this conflict are squarely, and without sufficient argumentation, laid at the door of other actors. Allende's own possible responsibilities or failings in this regard are not analysed. A book which, quite rightly, identifies this issue as a significant problem, occurring moreover in a presidential regime, really ought to explore the hand that all major players, particularly Allende, may have had in it. Since this is not done, we are left with the impression of Allende as exercising weak leadership, if nothing was, or could have been, done by him as coalition leader and the country's maximum political authority to resolve the problem. This is not to say that Allende, or the UP, should be considered solely or principally to blame for the crisis of 1973. This is self-evidently not the case. It is simply to say that a book of this kind ought not to omit discussion of such an obviously central question, particularly if it also sets out to argue for the continued relevance of Allende and his ideals.

Second, the analysis of Allende's legacy and its relevance for current Chilean politics contains a large quota of voluntarism. Irrespective of one's sympathy with the central argument being pursued, if it is to be argued, for example, that 'the post-coup institutionality is creaking under pressure from the masses and there are signs that "Allendismo" is once more inspiring Chile's youth' (p. 137), we must be offered evidence. Instead, this appears simply as the author's assertion. The same thing happens when we are told that Chileans are turning to Ecuador or Bolivia for inspiration or for models: no evidence is provided. In short, the chapters that deal with these issues (Chapters 7 and 8) appear more as a 'wish list' regarding the direction that the author hopes Chilean politics may take in the immediate future, than a meticulous study of the continued relevance of Allende as a political figure. In so doing, the author weakens rather than strengthens his own central argument as to the ongoing importance of Allende's legacy.

Overall, this is a good work which has much to offer the reader interested in Allende's political history and trajectory and in the evolution of Chilean politics. At the same time, however, the text loses some force and solidity in omitting a more complete analysis in regard to its own major objective: discussion of the effectiveness and currency of Allende's political thought and ideals.

Universidad de Chile

RICARDO GAMBOA

J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 47 (2015). doi:10.1017/S0022216X15000607

Kirsten Sehnbruch and Peter M. Siavelis (eds.), *Democratic Chile: The Politics and Policies of a Historical Coalition, 1990–2010* (Boulder, CO, and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), pp. xvi + 373, £54.50, hb.

Since democratic restoration in 1990 Chile has been generally considered to represent a success story within Latin America. The country has been characterised ever since by relatively high levels of political stability, solid economic growth, impressive reduction of poverty and fast overall modernisation. A crucial actor in conducting this process of democratic transition and consolidation has been the centre-left-wing coalition Concertación that ruled the country from 1990 to 2010. It has been indeed one of the longest and most successful coalitions in Latin American political history. The Concertación era, however, came suddenly to an end with the victory of the right-wing candidate Sebastián Piñera in the presidential election in January 2010.