

Latin America, the Left and the Progressives: Ten theses on a divorce

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With different nuances and variants, Latin America's "progressive" governments are no longer questioning the myth of progress, are practicing intensive extractivism, are resigned to corruption and favor hyper-presidentialism. What's Left in this?

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Governments of the new Left have been dominating Latin America's political stage recently. In a substantial turnaround, they have supplanted conservative and neoliberal Presidents and are currently governing Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Uruguay and Venezuela.

Increasing disillusionment

These governments make up quite a varied group. There are notable differences, for example, between the way Bolivia's Evo Morales and Uruguay's José Mujica conduct their politics. But beyond their diversity, they share many elements that are part of a single approach and of course they are effectively different from any conservative or neoliberal government. They are all progressive governments, understanding "progressive" as a recent crystalization of a specific political identity. It's an appropriate designation, used in various countries, making it very clear that all share faith in progress, with their own particular ways of organizing the economy, social relations and the appropriation of their countries' natural resources.

There's a growing debate about these governments. I'm not referring to the classic critiques of the Right, which accuses them of being anti-democratic, or those of a very dogmatic Left, which accuses them of being conservatives. The comments I'm talking about come from a significant number of sympathizers, activists and even well-known leftist leaders who are anything but dogmatic, but feel disillusioned and distanced by or even opposed to this progressivism.

One of the reasons for this unease seems to be that this progressivism is beginning to point in directions significantly different from those traced by the Left that gave origin to it. These comparisons must be made with caution, however, as “Left” is also a plural category. The Left that launched progressivism learned from its errors and renewed itself, fed by varied tendencies. Much of that experience converged into what could be called an “open Left,” to paraphrase Ernest Mandel’s “open Marxism,” which tried not to be dogmatic, was tolerant and accepted diverse contributions.

This allowed it to establish close relations with grassroots organizations and movements, especially indigenous and peasant ones, dethrone neoliberalism, strengthen the State and attack poverty. That synergy succeeded in winning governments, launching processes of change and overcoming hardline internal oppositions, as in Argentina, Bolivia or Venezuela. With the passing of time, a progressivism emerged from within this Left that had its own political identity and would head in a different direction. We now appear to be facing a “grand” divergence between the Left and the progressives.

What are the issues on which these leftists and progressives differ? Among others, the progressives’ current proposals diverge from those of the Left that spawned them on the following ten points:

1. Development

Beyond its plurality of views, the Latin American Left of the sixties and seventies profoundly criticized conventional development, particularly maintaining an unbending attitude on environmental issues. The Left of those years questioned both the conceptual bases of development and its concrete practices, such as making our countries raw material providers.

Today’s progressives have largely abandoned that debate. They now accept the conventional concept of development, celebrating both economic growth and extractivism. While some of them denounce capitalism and even in some cases attempt alternatives, such as nationalized businesses for example, insertion into capitalism has prevailed. The current debates are about how to implement development—i.e. with more or less of a role for the State—but without questioning the myth of progress.

2. Democracy

At least since the late seventies, the Latin American Left has adopted the mandate of democracy, casting aside the idea of coming to power through the barrel of a gun. That was understood from Uruguay’s Pepe Mujica to Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. Moreover, they sought to go beyond national elections to what they called the radicalizing or deepening of democracy. They created participatory budgets, promoted referenda and extended and diversified civic participation.

Progressives, on the other hand, are abandoning that enthusiasm and contenting themselves with the classic electoral instrument: elections. They are intensifying delegative democracy and taking presidentialism to extremes.

3. Human rights

That Left incorporated the defense of human rights, especially when struggling against the military dictatorships. It was a notable learning experience, in which the old ideal of equality was linked to

safeguarding and expanding rights. Today those attitudes have changed, as we see these progressives reacting defensively when failure to respect human rights is denounced. In lieu of dealing with those problems, those making the charges are sometimes questioned or the juridical institutionality is criticized. Doubt is even cast on the validity of some rights, as when Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa stated that the rights of nature are “assumptions.”

4. The Constitution and laws

The “open Left” insisted on recovering the role of the country’s Political Constitution as a basic framework shared by all of society. Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela approved new Constitutions that contained innovative rights and new regulatory frameworks. The idea was to buttress independence, impartiality and the capacities of the judicial branch of government.

Now progressivism is sending out contradictory signals. It is uncomfortable with the obligations imposed on it by its own Constitution and even works around them to lighten political, social or environmental controls. Arbitrariness is tolerated in the fulfillment of legal requirements, while laws are manipulated or the judicial branch is pressured. And in some moments it would even seem that the new Constitutions are being eroded.

5. Corruption

At the end of the 20th century the Left was one of the firmest battlers against corruption. With corruption one of the neoliberal governments’ weakest flanks, the Left repeatedly attacked that area in those years, exposing deals, business favoritism and many other activities of that nature.

Now that impetus seems to be waning. Various examples show that corruption cases involving key figures in the progressive governments haven’t been handled adequately, while old vices have ended up being repeated in the assigning of public funds. A certain attitude of resignation and tolerance toward all this is rearing its head.

6. Social movements

The Latin American Left cultivated a close relationship with the subordinated and marginalized groups for decades. The initial progressivism resulted from that symbiosis as progressive leaders came to office thanks to indigenous, peasant or urban grassroots movements. And those same sectors provided not only votes, but also ideas, priorities and even leaders and professionals who are now in state offices.

But the progressive governments seem to have distanced themselves from several of these movements, not understanding or responding to their demands and going on the defensive. They even try to divide them, and failing that, resort to harassing them, wasting a lot of energy classifying people according to whether or not they are revolutionary. They’ve lost the nexuses with indigenous, environmentalist, feminist and human rights organizations. Given these attitudes, disappointment is spreading among social leaders who in the past were attacked by neoliberal governments and are today feeling the same sting from progressive ones.

7. Social justice

The classic Left conceived of social justice as encompassing a broad array of themes, from education to food, from housing to labor rights...

Progressivism, in contrast, is particularly leaning toward justice as economic redistribution focused on monetary compensation for the poorest and massive consumerism for the rest. I'm not denying either the importance of this kind of help to pull millions of families out of poverty, or the relevance of the access grassroots sectors now have to the kind of goods and services they need. My point is that justice is much more than vouchers and quality of life is much more than buying televisions. They can't be reduced to the economicism of monetary compensation.

8. Integration and globalization

The Left succeeded in re-launching regional and continental integration and fought against trade liberalization schemes such as the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, other bilateral and regional free trade agreements and the South American Regional Infrastructure.

The progressives have also launched some very interesting initiatives, such as the Trade Agreement of the Peoples, the Bank of the South, some of the agreements of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and the sucre (Unitary Regional Compensation System), the currency agreed to for use by the ALBA members. But while the Latin Americanist rhetoric still remains, no continental policies are being implemented in key sectors such as energy, agri-foods or industry. There have been advances in some areas, such as cultural integration, but the States are still competing commercially and neighbors not infrequently set commercial traps. At the end of the day, all of them have accepted the global governance of commerce.

9. Independence and criticism

The Left maintained a close relationship with intellectuals and apart from specific debates respected their rigor and independence. It even sought original angles, exploring the unobvious and listening to a plurality of voices.

But progressives are giving ever fewer signs of appreciating independent criticism, preferring to listen only to friendly intellectuals; and when they run out of those within their own country they bring them from the North, taking advantage of how little they know about the national realities. They distrust exhaustive analyses, preferring congratulations and publicity support. They denounce free thinkers and demand loyal followers, and are quick to label criticism as neoliberal betrayal.

10. Discourses and practices

On a level we could call cultural, progressives draft different discourses of political justification, at times with an attractive sounding rhetoric of radical rupture, but their practice is actually quite traditional in many aspects. Their speeches in defense of Pachamama (the indigenous concept of Mother Earth) are nowhere close to their actual environmental management. They quote Marx and Lenin, but their productive agreements are with transnational corporations. They defend industrialization, but extractivism prevails. They proclaim they're responding to the social movements, but close down civic organizations. They congratulate the indigenous, but invade their

lands. And so on.

By divergent paths

Born as a recent expression within the Latin American Left, progressivism matured as a particular mix and hybridization of distinct cultural and political conditions, but ended up framed within Western ideas of development. Its stance is neither conservative nor neoliberal, which explains why its defenders present it as leftist, and given that it has been successful on various fronts, it enjoys electoral support. But it now seems to be taking a different path than the Left, framed within conventional development which it executes in its own way, adjusting democracy and appealing to monetary compensation. It's on its own road, one that communes with the myth of progress.

Perhaps this progressivism will correct its course in some countries, taking up the best of the classic Left again and constructing other alternative syntheses that effectively incorporate issues such as Good Living or Justice in the broad sense.

Whether the syntheses are these or others, in all cases they will have to cut loose from the myth of progress. Or to put it another way, there's a need for less progressivism and more leftism. If, however, progressivism persists in practices such as extractivism or hyper-presidentialism, it will become definitively distanced from the Left.

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