

South America: end of a cycle? Popular movements, “progressive” governments and eco-socialist alternatives

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More than 40 years after the coup d'état that defeated the Chilean road to socialism and 30 years since the foundation of the largest social movement on the continent, the Movimiento de trabajadores rurales sin tierra (MST - Movement of Landless Rural Workers) of Brazil; 20 years since the Zapatista cry of “Ya basta!” in Chiapas against neoliberalism and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), more than 15 years since the electoral victory of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela (and more than two years after his death), the peoples of South America and their attempts to build an emancipatory project seem to be at a new turning point. A, social, political and economic cycle of medium length gradually seems to be becoming exhausted, but not in a uniform or linear manner. With its real (but relative) progress, its difficulties and significant limitations, the experiences of the different and varied “progressive” governments of the region, whether centre-left, social liberal, or radical national-popular, claiming to be anti-imperialist or characterised in conservative circles as “populist”, the Bolivarian, Ando-Amazonian or “citizen” revolutions or simple institutional progressive changes, these political processes seem to be encountering big endogenous problems, a strong conservative backlash (national and global) and not a few unresolved strategic dilemmas.

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Without a doubt, in several countries where there have been crushing electoral victories for left-wing or anti-neoliberal forces, in particular when these victories are the product of years of social and popular struggle (such as in Bolivia) or a rapid politicization-mobilization from below (such as in Venezuela), the state and its regulations, domestic economic growth, the fight against extreme poverty through specific programs for redistribution and the institutionalization of new public services have been gaining ground: a noticeable difference to the infernal cycle of privatization, fragmentation and violence of the neoliberal capitalist deregulation of the 1990s. The public force has reappeared as regulator of the domestic market, redistributing part of the income from extraction profits and subsoil resources toward the more impoverished, with direct and immediate effects for millions of citizens, a process that explains in part the solidness of the social and electoral base of these experiences up until today (and in some cases more after more than 10 years of government). For the first time in decades, various “post-neoliberal” governments, starting with Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, have showed that it is possible to begin to regain control of natural resources and, at the same time, reduce extreme poverty and social inequalities with reforms of political inclusion of broad popular sector. Also the dream of Bolivar has re-emerged at the

geopolitical continental level through initiatives of alternative regional integration and cooperation among peoples (such as the ALBA-TCP), trying to regain the space of national sovereignty from the big powers of the North, military imperialism and the transnational companies or the unilateral orders of the world's financial institutions.

At a time when the old world and the peoples of the European Union are subject to the financial dictatorship of the Troika (IMF, European Commission and European Central Bank) and a deep economic, political, and even moral crisis, it is important to emphasize the ability shown by several popular movements and leaders in Latin America to resist and begin to rebuild multilateralism, democratize democracy and even reinvent politics, with projects that present alternatives for the twenty-first century. When a country like Greece tries to raise its head under the onslaught of the debt and the European ruling classes, when many workers, young people and collectives in this part of the world seek emancipatory directions, we can learn a lot from Latin America, its traumatic experience with neoliberal capitalist fundamentalism and its heroic attempts to counteract it from the south of the world-system.

However, as the theologian and sociologist Francois Houtart said in early 2015 the key challenge - in particular for countries that have most raised expectations of change - remains the definition of paths of profound transition toward a new paradigm of post-capitalist civilization. That is to say not being trapped in an objective of post-neoliberal modernization and even less within a welfare-oriented neo-developmentalism or an attempt at reconciliation between national growth, regional bourgeoisies and foreign capital: it is about aiming at a transformation of the social relations of production and forms of ownership. Without doubt, the task is daunting and arduous.

In this perspective and in this historic moment, despite the democratic advances conquered with blood and sweat [1] there are multiple stresses and limits to the various Latin American "progresismos" which have emerged in the period opened in the year 2000 in the fight against neoliberal hegemony. An intellectual - today statesman - like Alvaro Garcia Linera presents these tensions (in particular between movements and governments) as potentially "creative" and "revolutionary", as the experiences necessary to advance gradually in the direction of a "communitarian socialism" [2] taking into account the current relationship of geopolitical, political and social forces (and disregarding without much argument as "childish" all criticism coming from their left).

Within this orientation, the electoral conquest of government by national-popular forces is seen as a democratic - and "concrete" - response to the plebeian emergence of the 1990s and 2000s, and the state is considered as an essential instrument of "administration of the ordinary" faced with the kingdom of the law of value and the intensified neoliberal dissolution. In this defence of the different *progresismo* governments, very often analyzed as a homogeneous whole, we also find prominent intellectuals such as Emir Sader or the Chilean sociologist Marta Harnecker. [3]

– "Capture" of the state apparatus, and capture of the left ... by the underlying forces in the state apparatus

However, quite a lot of militants on the ground, some movements and critical analysts of various political horizons (such as Alberto Acosta and Natalia Sierra in Ecuador, Hugo Blanco in Peru, Edgardo Lander in Venezuela, Maristella Svampa in Argentina or Massimo Modenesi in Mexico, among others) insist on the ever more "conservative" dimension of the state policies of *progresismo* or post-neoliberal nationalism (from Uruguay to Nicaragua to Argentina [4]) and even its character as a "passive revolution" (in the sense of Gramsci). It is a transformation "from above" that actually

alters the political spaces, public policies and the relationship between the state and society, but by integrating - effectively neutralizing - the eruption of the and down in the networks of institutions, organizing a sudden realignment within the ruling classes and the system of domination, slowing down the self-organization capacity and control from beneath of the peoples mobilized [5]. From this angle the “capture” of the state by force can mean the capture of the left by the forces of the deep state, its bureaucracy and the capitalist interests it represents; seen thus the strategy of seizing power in order to change the world may end in a left seized by power, changing everything to preserve the main current of the world as such. For the Uruguayan writer Raul Zibechi:

“To the extent that the progressive Latin American cycle is ending, it seems an appropriate time to start to draw long term balance sheets, that you do not stop at conjunctural or secondary elements, to begin to sketch an overall picture. It goes without saying that this end-of-cycle is disastrous for the popular sectors and the people of the left, we are filled with uncertainties and anxieties over the immediate future, by the repressive right-wing that we must face”. [6]

In the last few weeks an avalanche of articles of opinion - several of which we have already published in Rebellion.org - have discussed the existence or not of a progressive “end of cycle” or even of the existence of such a “cycle”, this debate reaching such a level of polarization that some authors accuse others of “capitulation” or being “Cafetín leftists” (thus García Linera), while others are accused of having been converted into intellectuals commissioned by and sympathisers in the service of the states of the region and governments which are no longer progressive but regressive. This dialogue of the deaf does little to unravel the current political situation. The notions of a possible “reflux of the change of era” [7] or, from a contrary perspective, the idea of a gradual “end of the progressive hegemony” are probably [8] more useful to begin this discussion in a more constructive manner. All while recognizing that this phenomenon occurs in highly differentiated territorial-national conditions:

“This slippage is more noticeable in some countries (e.g., Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador) than in others (Venezuela, Bolivia and Uruguay) because in these last few relatively compact progressive power blocs remain and strong cleavages to the left have not opened up. In particular, Venezuela was the only country where the widespread participation of the popular classes was given momentum with the creation of the communes from 2009.” [9]

Beyond the controversy about the dimension of the exhaustion, inflection or reflux of the current period, and highlighting the variety of the processes analyzed, it emerges that at many levels the progresismo governments seem to have finally opted, under pressure from global and endogenous players, for a “modernizing realism”, which is often the best path to justify a renunciation of structural changes in an anti-capitalist direction: a dynamic that could be symbolized by the meeting (July 2015) between the Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff - a militant of the Workers’ Party - and the war criminal Henry Kissinger (former US Secretary of State), at a time when Dilma was looking for imperialist political support faced with a rise in opposition within civil society and a right revitalized by the amplitude of governmental corruption cases. For sure, the aim of the executive of the main Latin American power with this type of diplomatic gesture is first and foremost to support “their” dominant sectors and provide more “security” for business in Brazil. From another angle, the covert free trade agreement signed in 2014 by Ecuador with the European Union reminds us of the limits of the discourse on the “end of the neoliberal night” even on the part of one of the exemplars of this perspective at a discursive level. Today, this government, faced with the right and denouncing the dangers of a “soft coup”, is also faced with social and indigenous movements (and even with a weak left), to the point that we could talk about a situation of “political impasse”, in the sense developed by the Marxist Agustín Cueva, where the figure of the President plays a functional role of stabilizer to capital:

“There have been recurring moments in the history of Ecuador where the intensity of the horizontal conflicts, inter-capitalist, in combination with the vertical struggles between the ruling and popular classes, were too much to be supported by the existing forms of domination. While the politicians were looking for new more stable forms of domination, instability reigned until an impasse was reached.” [10]

More generally, it is necessary to mention, even if it is not the only problem, the presence in all the progressive countries of a productive model of accumulation combining, at various degrees and intensities, state capitalism, neo-developmentalism and extraction of primary and energy resources, with damaging effects on indigenous communities, workers, and ecosystems. This endogenous tension is articulated, in a combined and unequal manner, with a ferocious globalized financial context and the central fact of the current situation: the economic crisis that has hit the region heavily, causing a sharp fall in the price of raw materials and in particular of the barrel of oil (from almost \$150 to less than \$50), thus ending the previous period of booms and exposing again the dependent and neo-colonial productive matrix of Latin America, the cursed inheritance from centuries of imperialist subjection. This context corresponds in time with a clear offensive of transnational capital, from the states of the North and some giants of the South (starting with China) to capture more agricultural land, energy, minerals, water, biodiversity, labour, in a maelstrom that seems without end. In countries like Bolivia or Ecuador where there is more political awareness of these dangers, the government and its political supporters quite sensibly defend the tactic of moving through a necessary industrialized-extractive period to build the transition with some economic strength: that is something like a “post-neoliberal transitional extractivism” to enable small countries with few resources to develop, create wealth from primitive accumulation in response to the immense social emergency which exists in these impoverished nations and at the same time begin a slow process of change of model of accumulation. However, according to Eduardo Gudynas, executive secretary of the Latin American Centre for Social Ecology (Centro Latino Americano de Ecología Social - CLAES):

“There is no evidence that this is happening for several reasons: the first is that the way in which the wealth generated by extraction is in good part allocated to programs that deepen extractivism, for example, increase fuel reserves or encouraging mineral exploration. Second, extractivism has economic side-effects that inhibit processes of autonomy in other productive sectors, in both agriculture and industry. The government would need to take precautionary measures to avoid such deformation and that is not happening, in fact, there is a drift to promote agricultural export crops while increasing food imports. Third, as the extractive projects generate so much social resistance (recent examples are the Guaranis in Yategrenda, Santa Cruz, or the Yasuni Reserve in Ecuador), that governments have to defend them so intensively that the extractivist culture is strengthened in broad sectors of society and the search for alternatives is therefore inhibited.” [11]

Multisectoral popular protests

In fact, it is not by chance that the cycle of popular struggles and mobilizations that is emerging in the heart of America, announcing - perhaps - a new historical period of class struggles, is directly linked to this depredation and repression and its consequent socio-territorial resistance:

“The resistance is centred on mining and monoculture, in particular soya, as well as in urban speculation, or in the various modes of extractivism. According to the Observatory of Mining Conflicts in the region there are 197 active conflicts in mining which affect 296 communities. Peru and Chile, with 34 conflicts each, followed by Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, are the most affected countries.” [12]

This tendency is reflected in the context described previously of strong shadows over economic growth in recent years, the profound crisis of world capitalism which is still ongoing and the permanence of immense social inequalities and regional imbalances throughout the continent. On the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize the major offensive by the various business and media right wings and by the oligarchies in the region to take advantage of the end of progressive hegemony to recover the ground lost over 15 years to different charismatic and progressive leaders. The conservative and neo-liberal right continues to control -at the political level - cities, regions and key countries (like Mexico and Colombia), threatening steadily the rights established in the last decade and the process of a new regional integration more independent of Washington. We know that these regressive forces were and are ready to organize multiple forms of destabilization, and even coups (as in the last decade in Paraguay, Honduras and Venezuela), with the explicit or indirect support of the imperial agenda of the US.

However, from the bottom up, popular multi-sectoral, aboriginal, student and worker protests also advance their own agendas and claims, realizing the limits of the profound transformations made in the countries where “post-neoliberal” forces rule and their absolute absence where the neoliberal right still dominates, denouncing the various forms of repression, intimidation or cooption in both cases: collective opposition to genetically modified soya or workers’ strikes in Argentina; big street mobilizations of youth in major Brazilian cities demanding the right to the city and against corruption; deep crisis of the Bolivarian project, violence of the opposition and reorganization of the popular movement in Venezuela; in Peru, peasant and indigenous struggles against mega-miner groups (such as the Conga project); in Chile, Mapuche, employees and students denouncing the cursed inheritance of the Pinochet dictatorship; in Bolivia, criticism by the Central Obrera Boliviana and sectors of the indigenous movement of the policy of “modernization” of Evo Morales; in Ecuador, abandonment by President Correa of the Yasuni oil project and confrontation between the executive, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador - CONAIE) and significant layers of organised civil society; in Colombia, a search for a real peace, i.e. a peace with social transformation, economic and agrarian reform and so on.

The scene is tense and shaky. But, in spite of everything the “old mole of history” (in the sense that Marx understood it) is still digging and a wide variety of experiences of social struggles, class conflicts and political debates accompanied by multiple exercises of popular power, radical alternatives and utopias in construction are visible [13]. If some critical intellectuals could believe for a time that Latin America - or better said Abya Yala - could reach the new El Dorado of “21st century socialism” thanks to a “left turn” government and democratic electoral victories, we know that the roads to emancipation are more complex and deeply sinuous, and that the power apparatuses (military, media, economic) of the Latin American and imperial oligarchies are strong, resilient, entrenched and ferocious if necessary. Transforming the social relations of production and disrupting the dominations of “race” and gender in the societies of our America is a dialectic that will undoubtedly need to start from below and from the left, from class autonomy and independence, but always in a political key, and not from an illusory change without taking power. `

Ecossocialismo nuestroamericano of the 21st century

This is without denying that these collective attempts of people’s power should continue to rely on partial electoral gains or be able to consider the importance of conquering institutional spaces and supports within the state, if - and only if - the development of such new public policies are placed at the service of the “communes” and the subalterns. Can we use the state to finish with the (capitalist) state, using it for a time as barrier of containment of colossal hostile forces outside? Or, as Marx

found, is the state essentially the creature of the dominant which we cannot use as tool without risking that it colonize our minds, souls and practices?

It is clear that the control of the executive represents “only” the conquest of a partial power, and even more limited if there is no parliamentary majority and a mobilized social base - let us remember the lessons of Chile and how Salvador Allende and the institutional route to socialism of Popular Unity was defeated in 1973. That’s why a left-wing and popular government [14] shows its true alternative character when it serves as a lever and stimulus for the self-organised struggles of the workers and the popular or indigenous movements, favouring dynamics of real empowerment, transformation of the social relations of production, construction of self-management and emancipatory roads to “living well”. In the contrary case, the political forces of the left are sentenced to manage the existing order, and even in time of instability to rise above the social classes in a Bonapartist manner to perpetuate the state Leviathan, administering domination in a more or less “progressive” manner, with more or less friction with the local elites.

Without doubt, the inflection and doubts represent current dangers and opportunities; it is also the time to go back to discuss what’s new without forgetting the old and to discuss anti-capitalist strategies to build what we propose to call an “ecosocialismo nuestroamericano” of the twenty-first century: a project that is not a carbon copy, which rejects being overwhelmed by myopic electoral tactics, by the struggles of caudillos and bureaucratic apparatuses, but without accepting the pull and the illusion of the construction of a plurality of social autonomies without common political project, a centralized minimum. With this project, it is essential that we open eyes, smells, senses and hearts to those collective experiments underway, often existing above and below the consensual media radar, no doubt still dispersed or little connected, but that make up a huge river of struggles in a permanent state of transformation, from the real and concrete, from their mistakes and successes. Experiences that allow us to understand dynamic emancipating, original collective attempts and the dangers they face or circumvent.

For sure, we cannot point to an ideal manner of successful attempts at revolt, but rather a mosaic of praxis-knowledge-actions: some focused at the agricultural and the territorial levels, others focused on production and occupied factories, others on the neighbourhood and urban community, others originating from state or institutional policies but controlled by the users: struggles by women against patriarchal violence, of the homeless, indigenous people, the working class in several countries, an example of the agro-ecological alternative in Colombia, the demands for “living well” in Ecuador, the commune councils in Venezuela, or the factories without bosses in Argentina, community media in Brazil and Chile, the community patrols in Peru and Mexico and so on.

“Local organizational initiatives to take and exercise popular power, virulent street protests of rejection of decisions taken by the national and transnational regime; but also constituent assemblies capable of re-founding utopia, recovery of the reins of the political at the level of the states; the roads to emancipation are far from univocal. As experiences, they suppose trials, hesitations, and convolutions. But also, conquests. Complex, sometimes contradictory, but profound and authentic, experiences (that) constitute a source for those who participate in the task of reinventing societies and the way of doing politics,, who act as citizens of the countries of the region or women and men from other areas who have taken the difficult path of resistance and emancipation.” [15]

This plurality of voices and of examples allows us to pick up the thread of a discussion which already runs through the veins of the continent; allows us to think beyond the progressive governmental projects, assuming that it is, at the same time, indispensable to create socio-political fronts to confront the threats of the return of the right wing and imperialism in South America. Above all, it obliges us to think against the tide, against a “left which is contemplative, institutional,

administrative, a left of aspiring officials and civil servants, a left without rebellion, without mysticism, a left without left". [16] And it obliges us to think critically about our own developmentalist and teleological myths, assuming the global urgency of a mauled planet on the brink of ecological and climate collapse. For sure, it is essential to recognize that these various experiences that we have mentioned here briefly on how to change the world are contradictory, or even divergent: some isolated, very localised and others, on the contrary, institutionalized or dependent on the state. Hence the interest in resuming the major strategic debates of the twentieth century, but starting from current times and remembering the balance sheets of painful past defeats: how do undertake a post-capitalist and eco-socialist transition in the twenty-first century? What will be the role of the political-party tools and of the movements in this transition? What is the role of the armed forces, the parliamentary system, and the trade unions? Do we destroy them, use them, transform them, avoid them, split them... very well, but in any case: how? And in what way can we reconstruct common senses, cultural hegemony and an anti-capitalist left *from and for* the people? How do we avoid forging illusions about small affinity groups closed in on themselves and, at the same time, avoid the state-centred bureaucratic horror of the twentieth century?

The great Rosa Luxemburg said in 1915, "advance to socialism or regression to barbarism". In 2015, her words are all a sense even more catastrophic and premonitory: "eco-socialism or global ecocide". Without doubt, it is from the "audacity of the new" that we will be able to tear down the walls of capital, wage labour, neo-colonialism and patriarchy:

"Changing the world sounds very ambitious. What is more, it seems pretty risky if you take into account all the power groups that would never would allow you to remove capitalist civilization. But in the current circumstances, there is no other alternative. The living conditions for broad segments of the population and the land itself degrade rapidly. We are approaching a point of no return. And the option to switch planets does not exist. (..) We must accept the challenge. We must be rebels in relation to power (and maybe even desire its destruction). We must accept our limitations as human beings in nature. We must hate all forms of exploitation. We must oppose injustices and those who commit them. We must not resign ourselves. We must continue to demand and build the impossible". [17]

The task has already started; it is our daily bread, today and tomorrow.

Franck Gaudichaud

P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Such as the construction of multinational states, the installation of more or less institutionalized social rights, the creation of constituent assemblies and spaces for community participation or the regional integrationist impulse.

[2] Alvaro Garcia Linera, "Las tensiones creativas de la Revolucion", La Paz, 20011.

[3] Emir Sader, “¿El final de un ciclo (que no existió)?”, *Página 12*, Buenos Aires, September 17, 2015 and Marta Harnecker, “Los movimientos sociales y sus nuevos roles frente a los gobiernos progresistas”, *Rebelión*, July 9, 2015.

[4] It should be noted here that, for us, the current Chilean government of Michelle Bachelet is clearly outside of this category, as a “reformist” continuation of the neoliberalism of the governments ran the country between 1990 and 2010.

[5] Modenesi, Massimo, “Revoluciones pasivas en América Latina. Una aproximación gramsciana a la caracterización de los gobiernos progresistas de inicio de siglo”. In: Modenesi, Massimo (coord.), *Horizontes gramscianos. Estudios en torno al pensamiento de Antonio Gramsci*, México, FCPyS-UNAM, 2013.

[6] Zibechi, Raul, “Hacer balance del progresismo”, *Latin American Summary*, August 4, 2015.

[7] Katu Akornada, “¿Fin del ciclo progresista o reflujó del cambio de época en América Latina? 7 tesis para el debate”, *Rebelión*, September 8, 2015.

[8] Massimo Modenesi, “¿Fin del ciclo o fin de la hegemonía progresista en América Latina?”, *La Jornada*, September 27, 2015.

[9] Massimo Modenesi, op. cit.

[10] Jeffery R. Webber, “Ecuador en el impasse político”, *Viento Sur*, September 20, 2015.

[11] Ricardo Aguilar Agramont, “Entrevista a Eduardo Gudynas: La derecha y la izquierda no entienden a la naturaleza”, *La Razón*, August 23, 2015.

[12] Zibechi, Raul, “Hacia un nuevo ciclo de luchas en América Latina”, *Gara*, November 3, 2013.

[13] Pablo Seguel, “América Latina actual. Geopolítica imperial, progresismos gubernamentales y estrategias de poder popular constituyente. Conversación con Franck Gaudichaud”. In: GESP (coord), *Movimientos sociales y poder popular en Chile*, Tiempo robado editoras, Santiago, 2015, pp. 237-278.

[14] See Marta Harnecker, op. cit.

[15] Tamia Vercoutère, prologue to the Ecuadorian edition of the book *América Latina. Emancipaciones en construcción*, Quitogo, IEAN, 2013.

[16] Pablo Rojas Robledo, “Hay que sembrarse en las experiencias del pueblo”. Fin de ciclo, progresismo e izquierda. Entrevista con Miguel Mazzeo”, *Contrahegemonía*, September 2015.

[17] Miriam Lang, Belén Cevallos and Claudia López (comp.), *La osadía de lo nuevo. Alternativas de política económica*, Quito, Fundación Rosa Luxemburg/Abya-Yala, 2015, pp. 191-192.