

Editorial

LEFT RETRENCHMENT AND RIGHT RESURGENCE IN LATIN AMERICA: NEOLIBERALISM REDUX?

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This issue of *Policy and Practice* on the theme ‘New Models of Development: Lessons from Latin America’ is very welcome for a number of reasons. First, Latin America is rarely discussed in terms of development these days – many agencies are pulling out of the region and indeed some of its larger states are now known as ‘emerging economies’ rather than developing countries. Yet some countries in the region – such as Honduras, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Paraguay or, indeed, Haiti if we include the Caribbean region – remain very poor and can only really be regarded as developing. Second, the emphasis on learning from Latin America is welcome. Latin America’s development experience, I would contend, is not simply applicable to the ‘development context’ but also, if we take Payne and Phillips’s (2010) wider political economy concept of development, as relevant to *all* states including those traditionally regarded as ‘developed’. Third, the issue is timely as Latin America may be going through one of its periodic historic shifts, as Gutiérrez and Vega Cantor’s article on the Latin American Left here seems to suggest, with a waning of the post-neoliberal Left, dominant in the region since the beginning of the millennium, and a resurgence of the neoliberal Right.

Latin America then remains a key site of hegemonic struggle between neoliberalism and contesting development models. Some of its states, such as Chile, were among the first to experiment with neoliberalism in the 1970s, while in more recent times as O’Connell points out here, citing Kirby (2012: 27), Latin America was ‘the only region of the world where a “fundamental change” of development model’ was occurring. Latin America then can be considered a ‘development bellwether’ – a site of contestation

between development concepts where important future trends and patterns can be discerned, which can sometimes lead to the generation of new concepts, theories and even models of global reach and impact.

The three Focus articles appearing in this issue – José Gutiérrez on participatory action research in the context of Colombia; Chris O’Connell on the emergence and impact of the *Yasunidos* movement in support of the Yasuní national park environmental protection initiative in Ecuador; and, Suming Khoo and Aisling Walsh on two experimental tertiary education institutes in Mexico – all point to the importance of bottom-up initiatives aimed at consciousness raising to effect progressive change. Each article to some degree illustrates the enormous contribution which Latin American intellectuals have made to development practice. Figures such as Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda are identified as key to developing techniques which ensure the participation of the poor and marginalised in decision-making processes around development initiatives. Furthermore, these articles point to the wider significance of such approaches, which go beyond what is traditionally regarded as ‘development’ and into the realm of the political. In each article grassroots and bottom-up initiatives and approaches are seen as having direct significance for development outcomes resulting from policy decisions taken in the political arena. The essential question, then, to which each article speaks in its own manner, is how to ensure that such input from the grassroots, developed often through the participatory approaches pioneered by Freire, Fals Borda and others, can be integrated in an effective and faithful manner into state policy – or indeed if they should be at all. Hence, a central theme emerging in these articles – and indeed the Viewpoint piece by Gutiérrez and Vega Cantor – is this relationship between state and civil society in contemporary Latin America.

Case studies are different in each paper. O’Connell illustrates how the law of unintended consequences intervened to allow a state-sponsored environmental educational initiative in Ecuador, based on Freirean principles, to inadvertently lead to the emergence of a movement in defence of an abandoned state initiative aimed at preserving the Yasuní national park from

oil exploration. As O'Connell states in his conclusion, the inventiveness of this movement, using social media and other strategies to build momentum, shows the importance of grassroots initiatives and educational techniques to maintain the conditions for critique and protest, even under Left-led governments with supposed progressive objectives. Khoo and Walsh's article, on two alternative, community-based tertiary education colleges in Mexico, shows a community in revolt against a (Right-led) state, building 'autonomous educational niches' which seek to re-route 'development according to local objectives of economic viability, dignity, and sustainability'. Gutiérrez's article on Participatory Action Research (PAR), Orlando Fals Borda and Peasant Reserve Zones in Colombia, also seeks to underline the emancipatory potential of liberationist educational (and research) methodologies, such as PAR, to build alternative, autonomous grassroots social and political organisations among the poor and marginalised. In both cases – in Mexico and in Colombia – we see an emphasis on autonomous organising, not simply independent of the state but with a view to permanent disengagement from it, to further embed such autonomy. In neither case is contact with the formal (electoral) Left seen as of any consequence.

This aim is also the cornerstone of Gutiérrez and Vega Cantor's argument in their Viewpoint article on the Latin American Left governments. They rightly point to the key role that such participatory educational techniques had in forming social movements, which helped create the conditions for the rise of the current crop of Left governments in the region. Yet these governments, the authors argue, have betrayed the aspirations and trust of these movements, showing the need for 'an abandonment of ... electoral politics ... [in favour of] collective leadership and ... a process which requires new channels of participation and decision-making'; these to be developed through the implementation of techniques such as PAR. Hence the authors seem to be calling for a break from the state as it is currently configured, the implementation of a process of popular re-education along PAR lines, and, on achieving the required level of consciousness, the

reconfiguration of a participative, non-representational and non-electoral state.

While these are all worthwhile long-term strategic aims, what of the short-term, of the now? To answer this question it is instructive to cast a glance at the activities of the Right in Latin America in the present context, including their strategies and ideological and development aims; indeed, to learn from the Latin American Right to inform strategy on the Left. In a forthcoming volume, *The Right in Latin America* (Cannon, 2016), I provide an overview and interrogation of the Right in the current context. Using Michael Mann's framework on social power, I argue that the Right is underpinned by elite power in four distinct but inter-related networks: economy, ideology, politics and the military – all of these intersected by transnational power. In each of these I find that neoliberalism is hegemonic, precisely because in a context of inequality, it fosters, promotes and perpetuates elite power. In those countries most dominated by neoliberalism – primarily Chile, Peru, Colombia and Mexico, but also many of the smaller Central American countries such as Costa Rica, Guatemala and Honduras – neoliberalism is so deeply embedded in these power networks that it is extremely difficult to effect a decisive change in a heterodox direction, even if there is a viable Left party in the country and it attains power (as can be seen in Chile, for example, or indeed El Salvador).

Moreover, this status quo is supported transnationally: through international sponsors of Right-wing or liberal political parties and think tanks; through FDI (foreign direct investment); through membership of international organisations, such as the OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development), with Mexico and Chile being members, and possibly Colombia in the near future, as well as through the enhanced influence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in these countries – an influence rejected by Left-led countries; through free trade agreements with the US and the EU; and, through the formation of new regional groupings based on neoliberal principles, such as the Pacific Alliance (PA). The PA, furthermore, could become the incubus for a wider

hemispheric free trade agreement once the Right gains power in the main Mercosur countries which, it could be argued, it is now en route to achieving. Moreover, it could conceivably link up to the super-free trade blocs formed by the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) between the United States and other Pacific Rim countries in Latin America and Asia, and the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) currently under discussion between the US and the EU, as some of the more breathless commentators have suggested (George, 2014). For all these reasons, I call such countries right-oriented state/society complexes, to help signal the depth of embeddedness of neoliberalism in both the state and society, tempered, nevertheless, with a certain level of flexibility in terms of the presence of some Left organisation and policy input, but never to the extent of threatening in any meaningful way the existing neoliberal order.

In counterposition to these countries, I would argue that the changes implemented by the Left governments in the region, while undoubtedly disappointing for many of the social movements, nevertheless have been of sufficient depth and reach to present a challenge to the Right and the furtherance of the neoliberal model. In my book I show that in the Bolivarian countries, as well as in Argentina and even in Brazil, there has been a challenge to the neoliberal model in one or more of the power networks in each of these countries: economically with a halt to privatisations and in some countries nationalisations among other measures; ideologically with new laws limiting private media oligopolies, including ownership; politically through repeated electoral wins; militarily through achieving more civilian control over the armed forces, and in many cases reducing budgets and personnel; and, transnationally through the construction of new regional groupings that pointedly exclude Washington. Most importantly, there have been reductions in socio-economic inequality and poverty and increased action, in some cases, to correct gender and ethnic inequalities.

All these changes have signalled a sufficient threat to Right-wing elites to prompt their use of a wide variety of strategic responses which I group into three levels: electoral, mobilisational and extra-constitutional. In

terms of electoral strategies, in every country the Right has continued to contest elections, with important recent gains in 2015 in Argentina, with the election of Mauricio Macri and in Venezuela, with the opposition achieving a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. In terms of mobilisational strategies, elites in Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil have utilised what Fairfield (2015) has called their instrumental power in the economy and in the media, among other areas, to mobilise huge sections of the population to help bring down Left governments. These tactics can also be augmented by extra-constitutional strategies such as the successful coup in Honduras in 2009; the aborted coup in Venezuela in 2002; and, a further attempted coup in Ecuador in 2010. We have also seen the introduction and refining of what I call ‘smart’ or ‘soft’ coups in Paraguay in 2012 and also possibly in Brazil currently, whereby a country’s institutions, dominated by the Right, are used to remove a sitting Left president. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these different levels of strategic activity are not mutually exclusive, but rather are often used concurrently and in a dynamic, flexible and dialectical manner.

The Latin American Right, then, in the current context can be said to show the following characteristics. First, a consistent unity of ideological purpose which is dominated by neoliberalism; second, a remarkable strategic diversity and flexibility in pursuit of this ideological purpose; third, considerable strategic transnational alliances and links with international financial institutions (IFIs), with powerful foreign governments, and with private organisations, such as political parties and think-tanks, as well as the monopolised, private international media. Finally, its discursive insistence on issues such as crime, corruption and economic efficiency, chime well with voter concerns, many of which are being worn down by economic uncertainty brought on by the end of the commodities boom and the continuing ‘war on drugs’ in the more northern countries and beyond.

The Left needs to respond to these challenges urgently if its project of building a post-neoliberal order is to continue. It needs to re-establish links with the grassroots in such a way that enhances government; it needs to

build a unifying counter-hegemonic narrative, which can attract and engage voters; it needs to exploit divisions in the Right – between radicals and moderates and with regard to differences on social welfare rights and on inequalities; it must assess its own ‘structural’ power and learn to use it effectively – or construct new elements, such as think-tanks, alternative media, grassroots discussion and mobilisation – which pertains directly to the Left, rather than the Left-led state; it should pursue a more aggressive transnational strategy, linking up with new Left alternatives in Europe, such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, augmenting its reflexive capacity and international weight; it needs to take more seriously issues which the Right capitalises on such as security/crime, economic efficiency, and corruption, while carving out a space for itself around identity inequalities of gender and ethnicity.

Most of all it needs to highlight what it does well, while pointing out flaws in Right arguments and policy positions; simultaneously it needs to produce innovative and effective policy solutions which further rather than reduce or retract the political and social inclusion of the majorities. An urgent part of that task will be to articulate a new and more vigorous economic model which can leave behind the divisiveness, inequities and environmental dangers of extractivism. Overall, it needs to work relentlessly within the cracks and seams of the current model in order to learn from and reflect on its own praxis, as many of this issue’s articles recommend, so as to construct a ‘pragmatic post-neoliberalism’ that can counteract the formidable challenge of the Right.

Hence, rather than a single strategy based on consciousness changing effected by PAR and other reflexive and organisational techniques, crucial though this is, the Left in fact needs a twin-track strategy. The first is long-term based around such participative strategies as signalled by the articles in this issue; the second, however, must be short-term with an aim to securing Left dominance over the state. And both these strategies need to be united around a basic set of objectives, that is ‘a counterhegemonic narrative around which centre-Left and Left forces can coalesce for progressive

change’ (Perla, Mojica and Bibler, 2013: 328), or as Burbach et al. (2013: 158) term it, ‘a singular socialist horizon’, which is open but without ‘divisions that allow the Right to strengthen’.

While the experience with the recent Left governments may have been discouraging on so many levels, it is important to also recognise and reflect on the positive – the reductions in inequality and poverty and the introduction of anti-racist measures and discourse, for example. Abandoning electoralism will mean ceding the state to the Right with the inevitable negative outcomes in terms of the reversal of these advances: increased inequality, continued and intensified environmental destruction, and increased ethnic, and possibly, gender discrimination. Furthermore, it risks the deeper embedding of the neoliberal ‘development’ model in those countries which have been led by the Left, to the extent seen in those countries identified here as dominated by neoliberalism and grouped into the Pacific Alliance. This is a stark choice and one not to be taken lightly. The reaction by progressive forces to it could well determine the extent of neoliberalism’s global dominance in the medium to long-term.

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