

Viewpoint

REVOLUTIONS OF THE POSSIBLE: UNDERSTANDING THE RISE (AND CRISIS) OF THE NEW LATIN AMERICAN LEFT

José Gutiérrez and Renán Vega Cantor

Latin America has been at the centre of the global political debate over the last two decades. Political developments, from the Zapatista uprising in 1994 to the rise of the series of so-called ‘progressive’ governments in the region, shattered to pieces both the ‘Washington Consensus’ which had emerged in the post-Cold War scenario, as well as the confidence in uncontested neoliberal hegemony characterised in Fukuyama’s (1992) assertion that history had effectively come to an end after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The cycle of radical protest in the continent, which saw an array of new social actors emerging – which challenged traditional left-wing paradigms – inspired the anti-globalisation movement and also emboldened the political left elsewhere which saw that an ‘alternative’ was indeed possible.

Two decades later, both the social movements and the ‘progressive’ governments they (sometimes) brought to power seem to be experiencing the first signs of a crisis. The latest election in Venezuela, which gave a clear advantage to the right, the rise to power of an open neoliberal government in Argentina, the ongoing difficulties in Brazil, the often sour relations in Ecuador between the government and organised social movements, the defeat of Bolivia’s Evo Morales in his bid to secure yet another re-election, are but a few signs of the possible exhaustion of this political model. The lack of sustained and significant mass movements in the continent over the last ten years are yet another sign that the escalation of mass empowerment has reached its peak and is now in decline.

The calls of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, after the latest election, to re-invigorate the project, has led some to wonder what it is that

actually needs to be re-invigorated. It is with this question in mind that we need to have a sober evaluation of the lessons learned during the latest cycle of transformative protest; its strengths, weaknesses and limitations. Naturally, this is not the space to get into this task in any detail. We merely wish to contribute some ideas to a global debate on much needed alternatives, at a time when the current model of society is plunging us straight towards environmental and social disaster. We have no magic formulas, nor do we believe that they exist. We hope these few ideas may help to move the debate away from the equally damaging idealisation and demonisation so prevalent in international discourses on Latin America.

Radical roots

It is impossible to understand the most recent cycle of protest in Latin America without addressing properly the history behind it. Neither the Zapatista movement, nor Venezuela's former president Hugo Chávez, came out of nowhere. In one way or another, both were the product of the failures of the Latin American modernising and state-making projects, firmly inscribed in the capitalist world-system from the late nineteenth century onwards. Thus, its 'development' was a model of dependence, lacking in internal dynamism, developing only those sectors of the economy which were of any interest to the world markets. Latin America first became connected to the world markets while imperialism was in full swing (1870s) and its first industrialisation attempts (1930s-1960s) came in a late period when they were unable to compete in international markets and had also to compete in their own local markets with a much more developed foreign industry. The crisis of the Import Substitution Model in the late 1960s – because of its lack of dynamism, the lack of capital goods, the inability to absorb the rural population which accumulated in misery belts around urban centres, etc. – together with the panic caused among the elites by the Cuban revolution in 1959, led to authoritarian responses. This authoritarianism took the form of naked dictatorships or veiled autocratic regimes, such as the restricted democracy in Venezuela or Colombia, all of them dominated by the National Security Doctrine in their fight against the 'internal enemy', within the Cold War context.

The authoritarian alternative, which often combined with extreme economic liberalism was enforced through authoritarian means, proving that the invisible hand of the market was often preceded by the iron fist of the military. This authoritarianism produced mass mobilisation in the early 1980s, at a time of deep recession and the debt crisis, which combined the democratic agenda with the struggle against imposed structural adjustment programmes. Examples of these mobilisations include protests in Chile (1983), the Dominican Republic (1984), and Venezuela (1989), all of which included the important participation of women who bore the bulk of the weight of the economic crisis on their shoulders. While the authoritarian governments were soon followed by democratic ones, the crisis of the socialist paradigm and the neoliberal conversion of some former leftists into technocrats (most notably in Chile, but elsewhere too), led to these democracies pushing the neoliberal agenda further forward as the only possible way to ‘develop’ Latin America.

Although many of these popular mobilisations were often co-opted or defeated, they created the basis for a new left which was to flourish at the ‘end of history’. A key element to this rejuvenation was the Sandinista revolution (1979-1990) which, in spite of its bitter end after the protracted low intensity warfare funded by the US, posed important questions on participatory methodological approaches in politics – a different ‘style’ of doing militant work, direct democratic mechanisms, etc. – which left a wealth of experience for future movements.

The 1990s began with the mass mobilisation of indigenous people – which became ‘visible’ to militants and activists after the erosion of the traditional left-wing paradigm – against the five hundredth anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of Latin America in 1992. In the first half of the 1990s it was indigenous peoples in the continent which led the first mass rebellions against the Washington Consensus: Chiapas (1994), Ecuador (1996) and the coca producers protesting against the ‘war on drugs’ imposed on rural communities in Peru, Bolivia and Colombia (1994). These protests marked the appearance not only of new civil society activists, but also of new reasons

to protest, for example against the harmful environmental effects of extractive industries, while the struggle for land gave impetus to movements for greater political autonomy and empowerment. The emergence and growth of these protest movements coincided with neoliberalism entering a phase of crisis at the turn of the century, which settled into a more urban pattern of protest epitomised by the water and gas wars of Bolivia (2000, 2003), the Argentinian economic crisis (2001), the successive Ecuadorian crises (2000-2005), and the unceremonious fall of president Fujimori in Peru (2000). The rallying cry of '*Que se vayan todos*' (Out with them all) created an impressive community of active subjects which, bringing together all of the marginalised sectors in civil society, effectively dismantled the hegemony of technocratic rule, while proving that politics is also done on the streets.

Not so radical results

It is in this context of mass mobilisation and in the quest for alternatives, that the so-called 'progressive' governments – a term which conceals important differences between them, but which we use in want of a better label – made an appearance. The first to come to power was the charismatic Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1998), breaking the isolation of Cuba, arbitrarily embargoed by the US. Over time, other presidents would join him, a mixture of more or less committed social democrats with links to radical sectors such as Evo Morales (Bolivia) and Rafael Correa (Ecuador), and populist nationalists with organic links to some social movements, notably Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua) and Néstor and Cristina Kirchner (Argentina). Other emergent leaders were Michelle Bachelet (Chile) and Lula da Silva (Brazil) who emerged from culturally progressive sectors and were nonetheless dogmatic neoliberals in the economic sphere. In most cases, the ascendancy of the 'progressive' governments led directly to the demobilisation and co-optation of social movements who were turned into ideological apparatuses of the state and spokespeople for the government. An extreme example was Argentina, but in one way or another, every 'progressive' government restricted the independence of social movements. At the same time, all of these governments encapsulated the subjective and objective contradictions of the Latin American process, particularly the contradiction between a

radical rhetoric and the continuity of the dependant economic model based on primary export commodities, although with a redistributive twist. This contradiction make us wonder if the attempts at economic integration and political integration which have been progressively replacing the traditionally US dominated Organisation of American States, such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), are the seeds of a definitive breakaway with dependency or the regionalisation of the Dutch disease because of their overreliance on primary commodities (primarily but not exclusively, oil).

‘Progressive’ governments managed to create much needed redistributive policies (social services, education, health, etc.), which took millions out of poverty and gave them universal literacy and health effectively for the first time in history, thanks largely to the high price of primary commodities and the subsequent influx of cash (*divisas*). This process meant only a relative change in relation to the orthodox neoliberal phase but was welcomed by neglected populations which, for the most part, failed to benefit from the economic bonanzas of which Latin American history has been plagued. However, it would be far-fetched to talk about post-neoliberalism: the socialism of these governments, more often than not, was aspirational, since the material bases of the capitalist system were left largely untouched. It was ‘socialism of consumption’, not at the level of production save for some isolated experiences of self-management in Venezuela or Argentina. For the most part, the question of production was framed in merely quantitative terms. The question in the struggle for production, however, is not so much how *much* is produced, but *what, how* and *why* we produce.

In reality, the old model of dependency and its international division of labour was never challenged, while the regional political debate was limited by short-term geopolitical considerations. Alas, the development of an economy based around the endogenous needs of hemispheric populations remains an elusive aspiration. It is assumed that geopolitical changes alone,

such as the erosion of US hegemony in the region after the defeat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) initiative and the meltdown of the Washington Consensus on the one hand, and the emergence of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) bloc of emerging economies on the other, will have an intrinsic benefit on the region. However, this is to ignore the pernicious effects of the emergent hegemon – the so-called Chinese model in particular – in terms of neat exploitation and environmental destruction, but also in terms of the vulnerabilities ingrained in the new dependency.

The rentier model of capitalism in Venezuela, for instance, has made the country extraordinarily vulnerable to the fluctuations in the price of oil and breaking this dependency model is very difficult. This is evidenced by the fact that stimulating the productive sector has been systematically frustrated by the very dependence on the oil surplus on which they ultimately rely, becoming a circular problem. As the system is primarily redistributive and intends to stimulate consumption to create a meaningful internal market, local production finds it difficult to compete with cheap imports while the whole economy is geared towards stimulating the export of primary commodities, constantly damaging the productive sector constantly in the process. To break away from this rentier model, something which cannot be done gradually, means a lot of mid-term sacrifices to see results in the long-term – not an easy task when you are trying to gain the loyalty of an electorate which does not necessarily share a commitment to the long-term project. But overall, this dependency is unsustainable and the crisis of commodity prices, which has damaged the very redistributive nature of the project, has transformed into a considerable political crisis, particularly since the economic crisis has made ever more visible the politics of rentier capitalism.

This form of capitalism is characterised by a bureaucratic web of clientelism, corruption and cronyism in a state which is populated by opportunists and technocratic ‘converts’. Although corruption was not created by ‘progressive’ governments, far more could have been done to

eradicate it. Instead the corrupting network was used to a degree in order to consolidate the model of 'change from above'. Other 'progressive' governments, such as Ecuador, are a bit more protected from the fluctuations of the international market, because their productive capacity is much higher (Venezuela is an extreme case), but the current crisis has exposed the frailty of the current model and the lack of a transformative project.

Wealth of experience, poverty of project

There is an enormous wealth of experience accumulated over the years in Latin America, yet we have been unable to turn this experience into a transformative political, social and economic project. To some degree, we have witnessed revolutions of the possible; in a sense, every process of change needs to consider the objective constraints it faces and the burden of historical legacies. Yet, an element of imagination is needed in order to understand that the limits of the possible are wider than what we have come to believe. Breaking the straightjacket on our political imagination is a first step in order to contribute to bring about a transformative project. There are no magical formulas for addressing this project, yet there are some clues and some lessons gained from decades of struggles which are useful in this collective process.

Beyond the denunciations of foul-play from the 'Empire' and of neoliberalism, it is important to start thinking of strategies to overcome capitalism. It is extremely worrying to live in a time when, as Slavoj Žižek has suggested, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. This is particularly difficult to accept when the end of the world is most likely to come about because of the destructive nature of the current dominant economic and social model. These strategies can't be based on mere redistribution or on the current international division of labour. It requires a challenge to both; a look at productive relations in qualitative terms based on concerted international efforts that take seriously the scale of the current global environmental, civilisational and social crisis.

The limits of the neoliberal technocratic project were made evident through mass mobilisation on the streets, showing that excluding the priorities of the majorities from the neoliberal agenda was a political issue, that the problems of Latin America were not technical but political. The problems now being faced by the rentier redistributive model of the 'progressive' governments and the difficulties of creating the basis for viable alternatives to the current system – sustainable, long-term alternatives that escape the above mentioned infernal cycle of dependency – are, to a large degree, technical. But this is only one-side of the story. In order to implement the technical measures necessary to break away from this rentier system, a serious process of politicisation of the masses is needed. It is at this point that the technical becomes political as well, and we move from a quantitative emphasis to a qualitative one. We need a population who *understand* the issues at stake and the changes that need to be implemented, that *know* the sacrifices and risks of every step forward in the creation of a new economic model. This process necessitates a new way of doing politics, one which needs to be profoundly pedagogic, bringing together the practical experiences of this recent wave of mass politicisation with the lessons of half a century of committed educational praxis through Freirean and Participatory Action Research approaches. This understanding is necessary for only an informed population, a people who are *decisively involved* and *take an active part* in decision-making and implementation, will develop the *willingness* to do the necessary mid-term sacrifices which are consubstantial to any process of change. To summarise, we need to break the mould of the citizen as a passive actor, a mere recipient of more or less benign redistributive policies, a process in which development education has a critical role to play.

Therefore, there is a need to move away from the mere formalities of representative democracy and implement real forms of direct and participatory democracy. This was one of the elements that came up at the turn of the century with the wave of protests in South America, a promising awakening quickly overshadowed by the rise of the 'progressive' governments. This top down politics necessarily has seen the people primarily as a base of support more than an active agent. Over-reliance on

hierarchical and personality-based leadership has thwarted the spontaneity of the processes and its mobilisation capacity, taken away ownership over it, while the streets have been abandoned to recalcitrant sectors opposed to any idea of significant change. A significant process of change requires an abandonment of the cult of electoral politics. It requires us to place the emphasis on collective leadership and to start thinking long term, beyond five year periods, in a process that develops new channels of participation and decision-making.

A failure to meet the above mentioned challenges has given the space for a new breed of technocratic leaders to emerge – best personified in the new Argentinian president Mauricio Macri – who have capitalised the mistakes of the current ‘progressive’ governments and emphasised their technocratic nature as if this would be a real solution to the limitations met by the ‘progressive’ wave in Latin America. It is not by clinging to the *status quo* – regardless of whether it is labelled ‘progressive’ – that we will move forward in a transformative direction, but by grasping the seriousness of the challenges ahead, abandoning easy solutions, rejecting our role as passive spectators in the political game and developing criticism as a constant companion. Recovering our capacity to imagine a different world is a first step into the process of re-articulating the transformative agenda.

References

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José Gutiérrez is Adjunct Assistant Professor, MPhil Race, Ethnicity and Conflict (Trinity College Dublin) and Researcher, Department of Sociology, University College Dublin (UCD).
Email: Jose.antonio-danton@ucdconnect.ie.

Renán Vega Cantor holds a PhD in History (Paris 8) and is a lecturer in the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional*, (Bogotá, Colombia). He received the Prize *Libertador* on Critical Thought (Venezuela, 2007) for his work which includes several published texts on Colombian social history, pedagogy and social change. He was one of the twelve intellectuals who formed the Historical Commission of the Conflict and its Victims in the context of the ongoing peace negotiations in Colombia. Email: pen_critico@yahoo.es.