

The Left and Right in Latin America Today: An Interview with Claudio Katz

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On May 5, 2019 I spoke with Argentine economist Claudio Katz in his Buenos Aires apartment. We discussed themes from his last two books, Neoliberalismo, neodesarrollismo, socialismo (Neoliberalism, neodevelopmentalism, socialism, 2016) and La teoría de la dependencia, cincuenta años después (Dependency theory, fifty years later, 2018), as well as the complexities of the current regional conjuncture. In an incisive and wide-ranging survey, Katz explains the root causes and timing of the decline of the latest wave of Latin American progressive governments. At the same time, he emphasizes the fragility of the “conservative restoration” as it has unfolded in its wake, captured most eloquently perhaps in the paralysis of the Jair Bolsonaro government in Brazil.

Suspended between progress and restoration, much still hangs in the balance: Venezuela, according to Katz, is the most decisive extra-parliamentary battle ground for the political directionality of the region as a whole – what comes to pass there will decisively influence developments elsewhere, as it has embodied both the boldest promises and deepest paradoxes of the region’s progressive cycle. And of the many upcoming electoral contests, Argentina’s presidential contest in October 2019 will be the clearest litmus test anywhere in Latin America in the short to medium term; it is already drawing international financial institutions into a struggle to prove the legitimacy of their prescriptions. With regard to geopolitics and the international sphere, the generalized contestation between the United States and China is, for Katz, playing itself out in particularly important ways all over Latin America, demanding a reconsideration of imperialism and anti-imperialism. Taken all together, what Katz offers is a lucid panorama of the elements shaping emancipatory politics in Latin America today and pushing it toward a future still unknown.

Webber: To start, can you briefly describe the most important aspects of your political and intellectual formation?

Katz: Well, I am a typical exponent of the generation of 1970s in Latin America. I began to be active on the Left when I was 16 years old, being a militant in a left-wing party, involved in semi-clandestine activity throughout the military dictatorship (1976–1983). I was also involved professionally. I was a journalist, and later I returned to university and developed my activity further in the following years and decades. Later, there was a new moment, the rebellion of 2001, which modified my political activity once again, and we created a network of left-wing economists. We were quite involved in the process of popular assemblies of 2001 and 2002. Later, with the political changes in Latin America, I made many trips to Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil, and other countries of Latin America, participating in the various initiatives that emerged in that period. As is typical now, everything that I write is available on my website.

JW: To contextualize the history of the wave of new Lefts in the region at the beginning of the 21st century, can you briefly characterize the insurgency of popular movements toward the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s?

CK: In that moment I used the term “popular rebellion” to refer to these movements, in order to distinguish them from the classical Latin American revolutions – Mexico, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua. In contrast to those social revolutions, these rebellions did not involve a frontal challenge to the state, the construction of autonomous popular power, or a military outcome. In that sense, revolution is over here, and rebellion is over there. The rebellions were very deep processes, but they never reached the same point as the revolutionary experience in Latin America. The progressive cycle emerged from these rebellions. The progressive cycle is the result of these important processes: the social and economic transformation of Latin America and the reappearance of a type of insurgency, classical in the sense of traditions, novel in the type of subjects and the type of mobilization.

The balance of forces was changed, the original neoliberal projects were shaken, lost their direction, lost the governments that most directly represented these projects, and the combination of this with a favorable international economic scenario for Latin America, with the rise of primary commodity prices, generated a very important dynamic of social and economic relief.

Another important feature of the progressive cycle, I would argue, were the democratic gains, in the immediate domain of the streets, the balance of social forces, and the retreat of the repressive apparatuses of the state. There were also important legislative and constitutional gains. There were even symbolic gains, such as a president of indigenous origin in Bolivia, the challenge to the racist tradition of the region – very, very advanced constitutions in Venezuela and Bolivia.

The progressive cycle also recovered previous traditions, popular Latin American political ideologies. There was a re-encounter with the Cuban revolution and a re-encounter with earlier anti-imperialist traditions.

The cycle was especially visible in contrast to the governments in which the Right maintained its power – in Colombia, Chile, Peru, and in Mexico until recently – that is, an entire segment which continued to be outside of and hostile to the progressive cycle.

JW: How would you characterize the weaknesses, together with the strengths, of these governments, and what were the cases in which popular changes were most far-reaching, most advanced?

CK: The interview covers the themes of my last two books, doesn't it? In this book, *Neoliberalismo, neodesarrollismo, socialismo* (Neoliberalism, neodevelopmentalism, socialism), from 2016, I argue that within the progressive cycle there were governments that we can call centre-left and more radical governments. Between Néstor Kirchner and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, on one side, and Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, on the other.

It seems to me that they are not the same, but are rather distinct subtypes. The Center-Left governments widened the scope of rights, but maintained without change the political system. Furthermore, they were governments that were terrified every time an important popular mobilization occurred. So, they were governments that accepted changes and improvements, but always with a great fear of popular action. In Argentina under Kirchner one saw this when there were marches, and in Brazil it's very clear in the attitude that the government took in the face of the protests of 2013, those protests which changed the Brazilian scenario; the PT (the Workers' Party of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff) didn't learn anything from that, and so the Right was able to take advantage of the situation.

On the economic level, these governments were what I call neodevelopmentalist, in the sense that they attempted to recompose industry, to restore state regulation, but without modifying what had

already been changed by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism reoriented economies, putting agribusiness and the export of basic products at its center, as its axis. Neodevelopmentalism tried to limit that, but without looking to substantially alter the situation. In Argentina, this was very visible with regard to the importance of agribusiness, and in Brazil, with the financial system. That is, the two most important changes that had to be made in these countries: here in Argentina, to handle foreign trade, and in Brazil to handle the financial system. Neither Kirchnerism, nor Lula wanted to advance in this sense. As a result, what there was, in both cases, was an improvement in consumption; but a very fragile improvement in consumption, because if you improve consumption without any change in the productive structure, when the scenario changes it is very vulnerable.

The effect of those limitations of Center-Left governments has been made evident in what came afterwards. In the case of Brazil, the PT has a lot of responsibility for the arrival of Jair Bolsonaro, responsibility in the sense that, especially in the late period, in the period of Dilma Rousseff, the PT totally swindled the sectors that had supported it. Therefore, it lost significance in the middle class, it lost significance in the working class, and only maintained authority in the states of the North. Michel Temer was the Vice President under Rousseff, the Finance Minister was an extreme neoliberal. So, it seems to me that the PT generated demoralization, a disappointment which was crowned when Rousseff abandoned government without a struggle, accepted the coup d'état of 2016, and that allowed the arrival of the Right.

Argentina is different. Argentina is very different. Because if in Argentina there was also a process of swindling, a process of disappointment, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner left office with a huge amount of public sympathy, enormous, and, beyond that, during all of these years, the differences between Brazil and Argentina have been enormous; it's black and white.

In Brazil we witnessed popular demobilization, in Argentina there was popular mobilization; there, a return of the military, here a return of the military is impossible; there a collapse of the political system, here a recomposition, or maintenance of the political system. Here, there were new forms of popular action, such as, for example, the women's protests for abortion involving millions of people, a maintenance of the weight of unions. Argentina is a country which has had 40 general strikes since the beginning of the 1980s and four general strikes under Mauricio Macri, and when there is a general strike, there is a general strike. So, the tradition in Argentina is of a convulsive country, whereas Brazil is a country where order was maintained. Perhaps this is interesting, because the same type of government ended up with different results on the political level, although not on the economic level; on the economic level, the two reached the same limits. But it was one thing that happened here, and another thing that happened there.

Perhaps Ecuador is a third interesting case. It is interesting because one could situate Rafael Correa, more or less, with Lula and Kirchner, in that same spectrum, although with much more authoritarian features from what we saw in Argentina and Brazil - clashes with social movements, much stronger than what we lived through in Brazil and Argentina. That level of irritation that Correa generated in many popular movements did not happen in Argentina, nor in Brazil. But the interesting thing about Ecuador, it seems to me, is that Lenin Moreno, who ended up winning the 2017 elections, was one of Correa's men.

He won the elections with a program against the Right and ended up forming the most right-wing government of Latin America, a government which is equal to that of Macri, in terms of its agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This is the man who has just allowed the delivery of Julian Assange, has taken away the possibility of his self-defence in a scandalous manner. What is important is that he was a man of the same process. This is what we have been saying, that in Brazil, like in Argentina, also within the same process, there were elements that were completely right-wing. Temer, if you like, is the expression of Lenin Moreno in Brazil. In Argentina it did not go

as far as this, but in each of these cases it was another quite revealing element of the limits of these processes.

The other type of governments are what I have called “radical” governments, for want of a better term. These include Venezuela, Bolivia, and, in part, Cuba. The complex point here is Chavismo, which is probably the most critical phenomenon of all contemporary Latin American history. Chavismo is not comparable to Kirchnerism, or Lula, or even, I would argue, with Evo Morales in Bolivia. In the first instance because the level of popular empowerment which Chavismo generated has not been seen elsewhere, perhaps in Bolivia, but surely not in Brazil and Argentina – the level of participation, the networks of popular organization, the creativity, the political awakening.

Probably it is so striking because Venezuela, in contrast to Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador, did not have similar processes in the past. There was no Peronism as in Argentina, there was no Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) as in Bolivia, there was nothing like that history. After not experiencing such a history over decades it's as though Venezuela concentrated in a short period what many countries had previously experienced. This has made it more polarizing and, above all, has generated a reaction from the Venezuelan dominant classes without parallel elsewhere in the region. The dominant class in Argentina has been familiar with Peronism for 70 years; in Brazil, before Lula, there was already the experience of Luís Prestes; not to speak of the experience in Bolivia with a succession of political processes. Because Venezuela hadn't experienced anything like that, the dominant class reacted as if it were in the 1930s or 1940s, as if it had discovered for the first time that the people existed. This is what made it such a critical process.

To that we need to add the political radicalism of Chávez. Chávez was a very special personality; he was a combination of the anti-imperialist trajectory of Latin America, but with an enormous absorption of the Cuban revolution, and this is another feature that was not present in other cases. It is almost as though the ideology of the Cuban revolution acted as the organizing ideology of Chávez. Add to that the fact that Venezuela is an oil-rich country, and that therefore, for the United States, it has a role that no other country has. Consequently, Venezuela ended up becoming the point of explosion for the region, because of this combination; but even if nothing that I have been talking about had occurred, because Venezuela has the biggest oil reserves in the world the United States would still view it as it views Iraq, or Libya, something which is not true of the rest of the countries of Latin America. No other country has such strategic relevance. The fact that CITGO, the Venezuelan oil company, acts in the United States with a subsidiary and decisively affects the internal price of oil in the United States gives you a sense of how strategic the country is.

This transformed Chavismo into the great process situated within the progressive cycle, but at the same time a process with something qualitatively different to the rest of the progressive cycle. Venezuela exercised a certain leadership over the progressive cycle, but it was itself an experiment of a different order, something much more radical than the progressive cycle. This can also be seen on the economic level, because there was a redistribution of oil rent well in excess of the distribution of income in Argentina, Ecuador, or Brazil, albeit, paradoxically, dependent upon a terribly fragile economy, more dependent upon a single product, and therefore subject to much greater tensions.

Due to this combination of factors, Venezuela continues to be the center of conflict in Latin America, even though the progressive cycle has already passed. What happens there is so important that, with or without the progressive cycle, there is this right-wing reaction. Even if it's true that the death of Chávez changed many things, that the process suffered very important setbacks, and above all that the economic war led to a near degeneration of the country. The Venezuelan economic crisis is only comparable to that of the 1930s in the United States, with the same percentage drop in GDP, massive outward migration, and economic collapse. A scenario combining the economic war and the hostility of the dominant classes, with a high level of improvisation, irresponsibility, and corruption

within the Venezuelan government, has created a completely explosive situation.

In this sense, while the progressive cycle no longer exists, Venezuela still does. Venezuela will define what is going to happen in the future of Latin America and what will ultimately end up happening with the progressive cycle. If Venezuela had already disappeared, we would be having a conversation about the balance of the progressive cycle and nothing more than that. But Venezuela is so important that it means everything that happened in the progressive cycle is not finished, because the outcome of one axis of the cycle is still pending, and it is the most radical axis, and it involves the most insoluble problems.

For these reasons, what is happening in Venezuela will define the future. At the moment, there is a new attempt at a coup d'état. Once again, there is an almost sickening degree of hypocrisy in the discourse of the media. Venezuela is presented as a humanitarian tragedy, but Colombia, which has six million displaced people, or the mass of Central Americans who are migrating to the United States, do not constitute humanitarian crises. It is a tragedy for the media, but in Mexico there have been 100 journalists assassinated, in Colombia, I don't know, 100 or 200 social leaders since the peace agreement, while in Venezuela not a single one. It means that it is a little complicated to discuss Venezuela, because the propaganda obscures the debate. It isn't the passion; the passion is logical. But one cannot speak of the facts, because reality is annulled.

So this is the key theme of how the question of Venezuela is going to be resolved, and it is a struggle on two fronts: it is a struggle against the coup and against the United States; and it is a struggle within Chavismo to determine whether or not there is a recovery of Chavismo.

I share all of the critiques of the critical sector of Chavismo, across all fields. It seems to me that the errors, to put it lightly, that have been committed in the sphere of economics are completely unacceptable. But, at the same time, there is a level of popular resistance that is completely surprising. No other country could resist what is happening to Venezuela, and, in part, this is explained by the strength of the process from below. For those of us who have lived through other processes, and here in Argentina we know what popular gains are, it is not something that is easily erased; it lasts for decades. It is something that remains in the popular consciousness. So, one who has lived through the experiences of Argentina can understand why the Venezuelan seizes hold of these gains, fights with such force. Otherwise, the fact that Maduro has not fallen is inexplicable.

So, we'll see. It is difficult to speak of the conjuncture, but in two months the self-proclamation of Juan Guaidó failed, the attempt to enter the country with trucks under the pretext of the humanitarian crisis failed, the two or three coup attempts failed, the electric war failed. It's striking.

It's also interesting to think about Venezuela in contrast with Bolivia. It would be a good theme to study more closely. The discursive and ideological radicalism is very similar. The discourse of Evo Morales is very similar to that of Chávez. And yet, using natural gas rents Morales has achieved such a degree of macro-economic stability, an improvement or recovery of popular incomes, as to have aroused the envy of right-wing governments. This speaks of an objective fact – that Bolivia is not a threat, and when a country is not a threat there is a tendency to ignore it. No one in the State Department is watching Bolivia. If it goes badly, it goes badly, if it goes well, it goes well. That has given the country a room for manoeuvre that Venezuela has not enjoyed. With a much greater level of underdevelopment than any other country in the region, any improvement is that much more meaningful. And, finally, it is probably important that they have managed the country in the peasant, localist, closed tradition of the altiplano (Bolivia's high plateau), which has made Evo Morales act so conservatively. It is the antithesis of the Caribbean exuberance of Chávez, who launched huge projects. At the same time, Bolivia never was a reference point for all of Latin America, while Venezuela has been. So they are different historical destinies.

And Cuba is a separate case. But the interesting thing about Cuba is that it has something in common with stabilized Bolivia, in the sense of those miracles which cannot be understood by right-wing people. A country that has absolutely nothing, nothing of nothing of nothing, that is an island... that only has tourism, some minerals, nothing. Yet it has the most admired levels of education, nutrition, and, above all, health in the entire region. Another fact that draws one's attention: an irrelevant level of crime, which is unthinkable in the rest of Latin America. A country to which a million tourists arrive each year, and in which that tourism does not contaminate society. That same tourism in Puerto Rico, in the Mexican Caribbean, or in Belize, produces disasters, but not in Cuba. So, there we see the effect of construction over the longer term, in the consciousness of the population, the values of a society. It is quite an interesting example for all of Latin America. But this is another theme altogether.

I will close with this. The scenario of the progressive cycle now is concentrated in what happens in Venezuela, and the distinct possible forms of the region's future flow out of what happens in Venezuela

JW: From your perspective, when and why did the so-called 'end of the progressive cycle' begin?

CK: With the conservative restoration. One could say the cycle ended as the conservative restoration was imposed, with the central moments having been the coup d'état in Brazil, and later Bolsonaro, and the triumph of Macri in Argentina in 2015. In reality, the conservative restoration is a mix of elections and coups. The big change that is happening is in the Latin American political system. All the forms of constitutionalism are losing significance in the face of more authoritarian forms. And, in an accelerating fashion, the power structure is increasing its significance. Elections are like a secondary element. In countries where the Right is more firmly established – Colombia, Peru, Chile – elections are irrelevant. The level of popular participation is extremely low. There is much talk against Venezuela, but in Venezuela the number of voters in whichever of the elections is infinitely higher than in Colombia, Peru, or Chile.

The conservative restoration governs on the basis of the annulment of politics, of more extreme social disciplining. So, the problem here is to what extent the conservative restoration has been stabilized. We could say that the progressive cycle, as we knew it, it already finished. But has there been a conservative restoration, or is it fragile? I believe it's very fragile. It generates important symbols – for example, the annulment of Unasur and the attempt to create the Forum for the Progress of South America (Prosur), the establishment of the Lima Group to organize a coup d'état in Venezuela. But these are very, very, very inconsistent projects. For example, they have lost one of their key pillars, Mexico, following the victory of Manuel López Obrador in 2018.

The bases for the conservative restoration are fragile, because the classical neoliberal economic project of the 1990s and 2000s in Latin America now runs up against a changed international scenario. As a result, the neoliberals are bewildered, unsettled, do not know what to do. And that seriously erodes the political project of conservative restoration. In other words, there is a big problem, because neoliberalism is privatization, opening up markets, but how are you going to open up markets and trade in the middle of the trade wars that we're seeing in the world? What sense is there to say I am a neoliberal in light of Trump? The most serious ally would be China, but there is a fairly self-evident contradiction there, in that neoliberalism is an American, pro-Yankee doctrine, with the stamp of the United States. One cannot say that your idol is going to be the free trade of China. Add to this the fact that the principal investments are from China, and it is clear that, in contrast to the 1990s and 2000s, in contrast to earlier neoliberals, here we see a neoliberalism without a north star, without strategy. As a consequence, its political expressions are very fragile. Because it doesn't know very well what it wants, what its project would be.

Here we are in the midst of a conservative restoration characterized by zombie neoliberalism, and therefore the prospects are wide open. The progressive cycle had a Latin American project which did not take off, but there is no neoliberal project, beyond organizing a coup in Venezuela, but that is not a project. Even when they say we are “annulling Unasur and creating another thing,” they created another thing in order to organize a coup d’état, not because they have a strategy as such. It is premature to talk of a clear cycle of conservative restoration.

JW: And this explains the weakness of, for example, Bolsonaro and Macri in the current conjuncture?

CK: Yes. I think that the big test for the Right is Bolsonaro. To the question of what exactly are these right-wing regimes in Latin America, Bolsonaro is going to provide the answer. What happens with Bolsonaro will tell us what is going to happen with the new Right in Latin America. Because Bolsonaro is the pure representation of the new Right, very similar to what we are seeing in Europe, he is the Latin American representation of that extreme right discourse, very provocative, against democratic gains, for direct alignment with the United States, neoliberal political economy, and what we have been discussing over the past year: to what extent Bolsonaro is a fascist, or not a fascist. I think that one can say that Bolsonaro has ingredients, fascist elements, but fascism is a process, and what the process of the fascization of Brazil would be is unknown. Bolsonaro could represent only the point of departure.

In order for there to be a fascist régime in Brazil, repression would have to set down deeper roots and have a very clear Rightist leadership. There are two antecedents of what this fascism might look like, the first being Augusto Pinochet. Bolsonaro would have to first reach the level of Pinochet, that level of repression and that level of counter-revolutionary authority within the middle class, in the face of a threat... as a reaction to Salvador Allende, to have that. And for that anti-communist ideology to take root, and that solidity of a régime, and he would have to develop the social bases that Uribe enjoys in Colombia. Not only a structure of paramilitaries, but also the support of a sector of the right-wing middle class in the tradition of the Colombian oligarchy. Well, Bolsonaro is very far from beginning to reach those two things.

And the problem is that the government of Bolsonaro, the three months or so that he has been in power, is a joke, a laugh, a record of nonsense. Even at carnival, there were troupes making fun of Bolsonaro, because of his comic program; it’s a set of crazy ideas what he says, but it’s a delirium within a government that is in full paralysis. It could be that Trump is also delirious, but Bolsonaro is not Trump. Bolsonaro’s is a government which does nothing.

The Brazilian bourgeoisie is discontented with Bolsonaro. It is misrule, in other words, they don’t know the ABCs of how to manage public administration. Even the international adventures: to go to Jerusalem, to go to Israel, causes problems because Brazil depends very much on China and depends on the foreign trade with Arab countries. So, Bolsonaro is playing around with Brazilian exports, and the dominant class will not allow it. For that reason, the actual government of Brazil is the military. And if it keeps going in this direction, the military is going to end up replacing Bolsonaro, the Vice President Hamilton Mourão is going to end up taking over the government. Therefore, if the new Right in Latin America is Bolsonaro, there is no new Right. If that is the new Right... we’ll see, and it’s true that with only three months in office it is premature to say anything definitive.

The other interesting fact is that there are no other Bolsonaros in Latin America. There is a reactionary Right, like Uribe, traditional, but Bolsonaros? It’s also interesting that in Mexico López Obrador won, which is to say there has been an important turn in the other important country of the region, a very big crisis of the old Mexican Right. And I would point out, furthermore, that in the elections in Colombia and Chile there was an important growth of the Center-Left. In other words, in

those two other bastions of the Right, what is actually growing is Gustavo Petro in Colombia, and the new formations of the Center-Left in Chile. So the theme of Right is very wide open.

JW: What has been the role of imperialism in all of this? And is it reducible to the United States? What is the role of China in all of this?

CK: It's evident that Trump is trying to recover US hegemony in the face of China. That's what Trump consists of. As part of that strategy of recovering weight in the world in the face of China Latin America is a key piece. It's a key piece because, for the United States, Latin America is its own backyard. The challenge of China is not in the world, it's in Latin America; in other words, for the United States, the problem of China is not only the problem of China in the world, it's a problem of China in its own domain.

The attitude of Trump in Latin America is to recover its dominion in a very crude and primitive way. To return to what might be called the politics of the club: "I dominate and all of you subordinate yourselves to me." This is why Trump insults Mexicans, builds a wall, insults Caribbeans, despises Latin America. He doesn't have a politics of trying to forge a bloc, but rather considers them as vassals to be subordinated. Trump is playing with fire in this sense, because there are governments which follow him, but there's something a little complicated in what Trump is doing. Trump treats the countries of Latin America as if they were his colonies, but he can't actually, because he is not in conditions to act as a military power in relation to his colonies.

So Trump talks, but he doesn't act. Look at the coup d'état in Venezuela, it's typical of the United States: Abrams, Spence, Bolton, Rubio, Pompeo, act as if they were in the epoch of Roosevelt, the first Roosevelt, of Theodore Roosevelt; they consider themselves the direct owners, and think that they can therefore do what they like. And yet, until now, there has been no invasion in Venezuela, as there was in Granada in 1983, in Panama in 1989, or even a coup, as in the case of Manuel Zelaya in Honduras in 2009.

In other words, there is a divorce between what the United States says and what the United States can effectively do. It's very unlikely that the United States would be able to repeat in Venezuela what it did in Libya, or what it did in Iraq. So, Trump's is quite an adventurous politics, and to this point - it's too early to draw up a serious balance sheet - there have been no clear results.

The only thing that Trump has achieved is the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). That, indeed, is an important fact, because that is what the United States sought to do. Trump doesn't want to break with globalization, what Trump wants is to renegotiate multilateral agreements and to transform them into bilateral agreements. And by making them bilateral, to make it so that the services of the United States have more weight, that the copyright is charged, that there is more favouritism toward US companies, and that was achieved in NAFTA. So, it's contradictory, because he can't use military force, and the only agreement in the world he has managed to renegotiate is the one with Mexico. Therefore, curiously, Trump has a cautious attitude toward López Obrador. Overall, in this terrain, I would say one has to distinguish between what is said and what is done.

It seems to me that the economic priority of the United States is to renegotiate trade agreements, increase exports, limit the presence of China, and compete with China, this is what they are looking for. And to achieve that, they will need to change the government of Venezuela. Venezuela is important for the United States, not only because there is oil there, but because it would be a message to China and Russia: "no entry here." Therefore, what happens there will define everything - everything, everything, everything is concentrated in Venezuela.

If the United States does not achieve its aims, if Chavismo remains, it will be like Syria, where Russia is going to finance its military role, have a military presence in Venezuela; and if the United States doesn't alter that situation, Russia will have stretched its power into Latin America. If the United States is not able to change the situation, the presence of China, likewise, will not be reversed. So up to this point we are here, watching what will happen, but the structural fact is that China is penetrating and the United States is receding, and the United States wants to recover lost ground.

The big problem that the United States has is that its natural allies in this would be the right-wing governments of Latin America; but they are governments whose dominant classes have very close relations with China, and the United States can offer them nothing in return. The dominant classes in Argentina and Brazil sell soya to China, and the United States is not going to buy that soya. The United States itself sells soya; in other words, it's a competitor. So what can agribusiness in Argentina and Brazil gain by entering into an agreement with its competitor, the United States, rather than its client, China?

What the United States is trying to do, therefore, is very difficult. And at the same time, each ruling class of Latin America is seeking to maintain its business, maintain its business in an equilibrium, and it's very unstable because it has no strategy. In other words, Bolsonaro is going to recognize Israel, but it has to sell to China, and there is a conflict there; Macri supports the coup in Venezuela, but here in Argentina we don't just sell to China, the reserves of the Central Bank depend on a loan from China, so how is the government to manage this?

I see this as a very critical situation, which is crucially defined by Venezuela, as I have insisted. That is, if something happens there in one direction or the other, it will mean this one is winning, or the other one is winning.

So, for me, China is the big novelty. In that sense Latin America is significantly similar to Africa, but at the same time it is distinct from Africa. It is similar to Africa because it has been both of these places where China has concentrated its investments in primary materials and depends on these primary materials. And these are the two regions where China is investing in infrastructure. The distinction is that Latin America is more developed and has a much superior political experience to Africa, and that Latin America is the backyard of the United States, whereas Africa is the backyard of Europe.

During the progressive cycle of the last decade, there was a certain consciousness that it was necessary to negotiate with China in a different manner, because until now the big loser of the Latin America-China relationship has been Latin America. In the sense that Latin America sells primary goods, and China sells manufactured goods, and there is an enormous trade deficit, and the region is recreating a situation of dependency. There was a consciousness of this, but not action. There were many ideas around negotiating with China as a bloc, for example, but it was never translated into practice. And it was never translated into practice because to negotiate as a bloc implies the reduction of autonomy for each national group, each national bourgeoisie. If we negotiate as a bloc, it would be, for example, Unasur with China, and in that case, it would not be this or that Argentine export group exporting to China. And because the dominant classes are so strong inside of their states, a regional negotiating bloc of this type wasn't achieved. But that is the only possible path for the development of Latin America, the only one.

I don't believe that China is the same as the United States for Latin America; it seems to me that that is a simplification. It's an idea outside of politics, an idea of the intellectual world, that there is imperialism 1, and imperialism 2. It is looking at the world from outside. I'm in Latin America, if I want a progressive process of development in our region, China is not the same. One is the

traditional oppressor, the other is a possible counter-weight, which will depend on how the region acts. So Latin America could have a partner in China, in a project of emancipation. Up to this point, it is only an idea, but it is important to consider in order to avoid committing the simplification that we are passing from one dependency to another. I don't think so, the subject is more complicated.

JW: In the current conjuncture in Latin America, what are the prospects for the Left in terms of capacity for social struggle, as well as in electoral terms?

CK: Well, look, the first thing is struggle, popular struggle. At this moment, the Right has the initiative, but Latin America continues to be one of the regions with the greatest level of popular mobilization in the world; not like during the progressive cycle, but it continues to be a region with levels of political action higher than the rest of the world.

I think we have to be careful to avoid two errors: it's an error to think that nothing changed and that now we are the same as we were a decade ago. No. The effects of those four rebellions that generated the progressive cycle have been exhausted, and a new wave like that has not appeared in their place. We have resistances, but there has not been four rebellions like in that period. So, there has been a change, but at the same time it has not buried what came before, we have not lived through a process like we saw, for example, in the 1970s, with the Pinochet coup, or with the Jorge Videla coup in Argentina; in other words there haven't been any counter-revolutionary processes.

Because there has not been a counter-revolution, there has been a process of advance for the Right, but with popular resistance. And I think we have to situate ourselves on that level, the struggle is on that terrain. And it's interesting that there is a new generation. Those in struggle today are not those of the earlier cycle. And those who struggle now have processed the experience of the progressive cycle. We will see how they translate this politically, we don't know. But the generation that produced the earlier cycle did it without experience, arising out of pure neoliberalism. Now, the new generation is leading this process. So, we'll see. We will see what the result is in the future. It's unknown, for the moment it's unknown.

The other level is electoral. With the other level there is only one country of importance - Argentina. What happens there is definitive, just as Venezuela will determine the geopolitical and social scenario. The result of the election in Argentina in October 2019 will be decisive. It's the key election. We are in a moment in which Macri is in total decline, and Trump continues to bet all of his cards that Macri will be re-elected. Therefore, the IMF is making these unusual loans, to a country that is going to default, a country that will be unable to repay the debt, is offered loans that threaten the very financial equilibrium of the IMF. This is going to pass into history as the IMF's adventure to save Macri. My impression is that it won't be successful. You have been here and have noted that it is very improbable that Macri will succeed. Very improbable, but it cannot be ruled out. And so, a change of cycle in Argentina, the arrival to office of a different government, even if it's not Cristina Fernández de Kirchner who leads it, is going to change all the facts of the region.

Fernández has a very conservative attitude, very conservative. But if she were to come to office, it is not important what she says or what she would be, her arrival would mean a very, very meaningful change. In that sense, the next months in Argentina are key, for the electoral scenario, and because Argentina will very probably be in an economic crisis, a default on the debt, or something similarly huge, which will have an impact on the entire region. This will be happening in a country where the levels of social mobilization are lower than what we are accustomed to here, but much bigger than what is normal in other parts. So, in the next months, Argentina is at the centre of it all.

Finally, we will have to see what happens on the ideological level, on the level of the construction of alternatives. Here, too, this is a difficult period, but all of the constructions of the Latin American

Left from the Last decade remain standing. And we will see how they are translated. ALBA is still standing, the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) of Brazil is still standing, the intellectual networks of the Latin American Left are still standing, Latin American Marxism is still alive. On the theoretical level there have been important advances. It has been a very fruitful decade. There are many Latin American intellectuals who have written very interesting and original things, reflective of the explosive context of Latin America. In that sense, on the intellectual level, too, I think that we can be optimistic in terms of what is being done.

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