

Contradictions in the Latin American Left

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Latin America has been the success story of the world left in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This is true in two senses. The first and most widely-noticed way is that left or left-of-center parties have won a remarkable series of elections during the decade. And collectively, Latin American governments have taken for the first time a significant degree of distance from the United States. Latin America has become a relatively autonomous geopolitical force on the world scene.

But there has been a second way in which Latin America has been a success story of the world left. Movements of the indigenous nations of Latin America have asserted themselves politically almost everywhere and have demanded the right to organize their political and social life autonomously. This first gained world attention with the dramatic uprising of the neo-Zapatista movement in the Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994. What has been less noticed is the emergence of similar kinds of movements throughout Latin America and the degree to which they have been creating an inter-American network of their local organizational structures.

The problem has been that the two kinds of lefts – the parties that have achieved power in the various states and the movements of the indigenous nations in the various states – do not have identical objectives and use quite different ideological language.

The parties have made as their principal objective economic development, seeking to achieve this objective at least in part by greater control over their own resources and better arrangements with outside enterprises, governments, and intergovernmental institutions. They seek economic growth, arguing that only in this way will the standard of living of their citizens be enhanced and greater world equality achieved.

The movements of the indigenous nations have sought to get greater control over their own resources and better arrangements not only with non-national actors but also with their own national governments. In general, they say their objective is not economic growth but coming to terms with PachaMama, or mother earth. They say they do not seek a larger use of the earth's resources, but a saner one that respects ecological equilibrium. They seek buen vivir – to live well.

It is no surprise that the movements of the indigenous nations have been in conflict with the few most conservative governments in Latin America – like Mexico, Colombia, and Peru. Increasingly, and quite openly, these movements have also come into conflict with the left-of-center governments like Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, and even Bolivia.

I say even Bolivia because that is the one government that has elected a president who is himself a person from an indigenous nation with massive support from the voters from indigenous nations in the country. And nonetheless, there has been a conflict. The issue, there as elsewhere, is whether and how natural resources are developed, who makes the decisions, and who controls the revenue.

The left parties tend to accuse the movements of the indigenous nations that come into conflict with them of being, wittingly or not, the pawns (if not the agents) of the national right parties, and of outside forces, in particular of the United States. The movements of the indigenous nations that oppose the left parties insist that they are acting only in their own interests and on their own

initiative, and accuse the left governments of acting like the conservative governments of old without real regard for the ecological consequences of their developmentalist activities.

Something interesting has recently happened in Ecuador. There, the left government of Rafael Correa, which had won power initially with the support of the movements of the indigenous nations, subsequently came into sharp conflict with them. The most acute division was over the government's wish to develop oil resources in an Amazonian protected reserve called Yasuni.

Initially, the government ignored the protests of the indigenous inhabitants of the region. But then President Correa decided to champion an ingenious alternative. He proposed to the wealthy governments of the global North that, if Ecuador renounced any development in Yasuni, these wealthy governments should compensate Ecuador for this renunciation, on the grounds that this was a contribution to the world struggle against climate change.

When this was first proposed at the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009, it was treated as being a fantasy. But after six long months of negotiations, five European governments (Germany, Spain, Belgium, France, and Sweden) have agreed to create a fund to be administered by the U.N. Development Program to pay Ecuador not to develop Yasuni on the grounds that this contributes to the reduction of carbon emissions. There is talk of inventing a new verb, yasunize, to denote such deals.

But how many such deals could one make? There is a more fundamental issue at stake. It is the nature of the "other world that is possible" – to use the slogan of the World Social Forum. Is it one based on constant economic growth, even if this is "socialist" and would raise the real income of people in the global South? Or is it what some are calling a change in civilizational values, a world of buen vivir?

This will not be an easy debate to resolve. It is currently a debate among the Latin American left forces. But analogous situations underlie much of the internal strains in Asia, Africa, and even Europe. It may turn out to be the great debate of the twenty-first century.

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P.S.

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