

Latin America: Resistance and Revolution

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On no continent is neoliberalism so widely rejected as in Latin America, and nowhere has the resurgence of the Left been so powerful. The election of Evo Morales in Bolivia and the evolution of the Hugo Chávez government in Venezuela are hugely ideologically important. Whatever the direction and eventual outcome of these governments, they have already done an enormously important thing - given an arithmetic content to the algebraic formula that 'another world is possible'; the only possible one, socialism.

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Even the election of moderate centre-left governments, like those of Lula in Brazil, Bachelet in Chile and Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay are the product of a long period of struggle against neoliberalism and the right.

The huge Latin American panorama of struggle has given rise to new debates about revolutionary strategy - debates which the left has not been used to having for some time. How can this enormous generation of struggle, the rejection of neoliberalism and the rise of the Left be consolidated into permanent socialist gains, the power of the popular masses and the defeat of capitalism?

Continent wide tactics are useless and Latin American societies are enormously diverse. There is no "one strategy fits all" solution. However there are common elements in the development of these societies and certain common elements in revolutionary strategy as well.

There are a number of crucial questions, the answers to which will act as crucial guidelines for a revolutionary alternative. They include:

- 1) What is the nature of these societies and their relationship with imperialism?
- 2) What is the nature of the ruling class?
- 3) What is the character of the 'revolutionary subject'? What is the (potential) alliance of popular forces which might be mobilised into an alliance to make a revolutionary breakthrough?
- 4) What are the key steps needed to make an anti-capitalist transition and a break with the capitalist state and imperialism?

Each of the countries of Latin America is oppressed by imperialism. Semi-industrialisation in Brazil and Argentina means that the countries can no longer be considered as having all the classic characteristics of semi-colonies, ie being providers solely of raw materials and consumers of manufactures from the imperialist centres.

Nonetheless, none of them, not even a giant economy like Brazil, is an autonomous centre for the accumulation of finance capital at the same level as the imperialist countries or a centre for

multinational corporations which bestride and exploit the world.

The proof of the pudding was the debt crisis; in the worst years of the crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, a huge tribute of capital flowed out of the exploited countries towards the imperialist centres. Brazil and Argentina were of course in the former category, with a decade of economic progress destroyed in the 1980s by the debt crisis.

If all the countries of Latin America are dominated by imperialism, then they have a super-rich ruling class which is hand-in-hand with the imperialist bourgeoisie. This has created some of the most unequal societies on earth; in Mexico and Brazil the rich are rich by international standards and the poor are poor by the same standards.

The idea that there can be any kind of “anti-imperialist alliance” with any sector of the bourgeoisie whatever is tremendously far-fetched. At best there can be alliances around democratic objectives and only conjunctural national interests.

In his theory of permanent revolution Trotsky proposed that the working class had to lead the struggle for the national and democratic tasks of the revolution, that is to say unfulfilled tasks of the bourgeois revolution. Trotsky differed with the Stalinists in seeing the national democratic revolution as a phase of an uninterrupted (‘permanent’) revolutionary process, which would be carried out by an alliance of the working class and the peasantry, under the political leadership of the working class itself. There would be no Chinese wall between the national and democratic tasks and the socialist tasks, and the whole process would require the dictatorship of the working class (and the peasantry).

Insofar as we need to modify Trotsky’s theory, which after all was elaborated mainly between 1905 and 1928, it can only be in the direction of stressing the interaction and inter-relatedness of the national democratic tasks and the socialist tasks. To put it another way, to achieve real democracy and real national independence requires a complete break with imperialism and the oligarchy.

For example, for Bolivia to achieve real national independence means taking control of its own resources, ie the gas, the oil and of course the water. That means inroads into the rights of private property, in other words tasks of the socialist revolution. Equally, radical democracy at a national level cannot be achieved other than by breaking the grip of the oligarchy who ensure their control of the political process by corruption and violence. Democratic questions are directly interlinked with the issue of working class power.

The same considerations directly relate to the land struggle. The advent of (often US-controlled) agribusiness swivels the enemy from being simply local landlords, a subsector of the domestic bourgeoisie, to directly a struggle against transnational capitalist corporations. The fight against imperialism is one and the same as the struggle against the local oligarchy.

Revolutionary subject

The enormous growth of the cities, the development of agribusiness and semi-industrialisation in the major countries has significantly changed the revolutionary subject. This is summed up in the governmental slogan of nearly all of the Mexican militant left - “un gobierno obrero, campesino, indigena y popular”; a workers, peasants, indigenous and popular government. This crystallises what we can expect a revolutionary alliance in most of Latin America to be like.

Since the formulation of the “workers and peasants government” formula in the 1920s, the growth of the informal sector in the cities, the barrio or favela dwellers, has been dramatic. Most of the urban poor are not regularly employed, but get by through street trading, small businesses, crime etc. The

urban poor are a vital part of the base of the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela and of course of the mass movement which eventually brought Evo Morales and the MAS to power in Bolivia. The key demands of these people revolve around the basic questions of the provision of the basics of life - clean water, proper housing, sanitation, education and of course freedom from the violence and paternalistic manipulation by the state - ie democracy.

A new and positive feature of the Latin American movement has been the emergence of indigenous movements, the most well-known example being the Zapatistas in Mexico and sections of the movement in Bolivia. However there is a difference between the indigenous movement in those two countries. Subcommandante Marcos and the Zapatistas pose the solution to the demands of the indigenous people as being part of a transformation of Mexico nationwide, which Marcos tends to pose as "democratisation" (not socialism).

Felipe Quispe ("El Mallku"), key leader of the indigenous people of El Alto in Bolivia, tends to project an Andean indigenous federation which might involve succession from existing Latin American countries. In Quispe's case, this idea sits in contradictory unity with his ideas about working class power in Bolivia.

One central feature cannot be avoided by the Latin American left - machismo and its opposite, women's liberation. While the leaders of the social movements in the barrios are disproportionately women, the violence against and super-exploitation of women on the most machismo of continents is incredible; from the daily subjugation of women as the most exploited workers in an often suffocating paternalistic family to the ghastly mass murder of women in Guatemala. A more stable integration of women's liberation into the strategy of the Latin American left would unleash tremendous new forces and energies into the struggle.

The Question of Power

For the Left, the decisive issue is how to integrate all these questions - of democracy, land reform, the destruction of the oligarchy, an end to economic robbery of the elite and imperialism, the basics of life for the urban poor and liberation for indigenous people and women - into a coherent overarching strategy for the popular masses to conquer power. The 'centre-left' - forces like the PT in Brazil, the Frente Amplio in Uruguay and the PRD of Manuel Lopez Obrador in Mexico - do not of course agree with this way of posing the question. For them it is about getting more justice within the system, and we have seen what this means in Uruguay and Brazil - abject capitulation to neoliberalism.

This poses a first question and problem - that of class independence, creating political parties of the popular masses, led politically by the working class, independent of bourgeois nationalist and populist forces. Building a broad class struggle party on a national basis is a task which Subcommandante Marcos and the Zapatistas have avoided confronting. However, the 'Other Campaign' - a bold and audacious attempt to move out of their Chiapas mountain redoubts and unify the Mexican social movements indicates a renewed strategic thinking which - objectively - points in the direction of a new 'party' of the oppressed. How far this will go has yet to be seen.

The need for a strategy of conquering power, linked to that of class independence, is shown by the events between 2001 and 2004 in Argentina. Here a mass uprising overthrew the de la Rúa government in December 2001, unleashing a political crisis which saw huge sections of the poor and the middle classes mobilised in self-organised action committees and picaderos for more than a year.

But eventually this pre-revolutionary movement just petered out, precisely because there was no

mass militant socialist party, capable of melding the rebellious forces in a coherent revolutionary national direction. As James Petras' excellent dissection of the Argentinian debacle points out:

"What clearly was lacking was a unified political organization (party, movement or combination of both) with roots in the popular neighborhoods which was capable of creating representative organs to promote class-consciousness and point toward taking state power. As massive and sustained as was the initial rebellious period (December 2001-July 2002) no such political party or movement emerged - instead a multiplicity of localized groups with different agendas soon fell to quarreling over an elusive "hegemony" - driving millions of possible supporters toward local face-to-face groups devoid of any political perspective."

The events in Argentina show the bankruptcy of the theory of refusing to take state power, an idea put forward by Subcommandante Marcos (and rendered more profound by the academic Jon Holloway [1]). Refusing to challenge the bourgeoisie and the right wing for state power is linked to the refusal to build a workers political party. It leads, at best, to 'movementism from below', a continual opposition and protest, but with no idea of how to establish a global alternative and how to break the right, the oligarchy and their grip on state power.

How does the idea of the popular masses taking state power shape up to developments in Venezuela and Bolivia? In Venezuela the bourgeoisie have lost, or partially lost, control of the government but are still the economically ruling class - linked parasitically to the nationalised oil industry.

On the other hand, there is a tremendous development of popular self-organisation from below in the barrios and in the countryside; in addition substantial social progress has been made through the social 'missions', funded by oil revenues. However the poor remain legion in Venezuela and the solution to their problems will not be found outside of a radical redistribution of wealth, which means breaking the power and wealth of the oligarchy.

But in the context of a tremendous political polarisation in which the whole of the bourgeoisie and a big majority of the middle classes are against Chávez, this unstable equilibrium between the bourgeoisie and the masses, mediated by Chávez, cannot continue for ever. Sooner or later there will be a gigantic confrontation and the Bolivarian movement and the Chávez, leadership will have to make a choice. Depending on the loyalty of key army officers is useless.

With the threats of the right and imperialism the consolidation of popular committees into a national network of popular power is crucial. This must involve the arming of the popular sectors and the building of a popular militia.

There are important signs that polarisation is deepening rapidly. In Merida right-wing students have organised prolonged riots. The recent national congress of the progressive union federation, the UNT, split between left and right and did not conclude its business or elect a new leadership. These are straws in the wind and it would be stupid to ignore the gathering storm clouds. Imperialism and the bourgeoisie want Chávez out, and there is now a race between revolution and counter-revolution.

In Bolivia Evo Morales has moved decisively to clip the wings of the multinational corporations by nationalising the oil and gas. But this does not amount to expropriation, but in effect a significant hike in the taxes Bolivia charges the corporations. Even so his move is massively unpopular with imperialism and the right.

The exact direction in which the Morales government will go is unknown. In the medium term, Morales and his team will have to make their choice - between the oligarchy and imperialism on the

one hand and the self-organised masses on the other. The example of Lula and the fate of the Brazilian PT is eloquent. If you try to avoid the question of power, you will end up either defeated or capitulating.

P.S.

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