

Latin America: New Challenges to Imperialism

Friday 30 June 2006, by [COCKROFT James](#) (Date first published: June 2006).

More than 25 years of neoliberalism in Latin America have undermined the region's local industry, small farms, and employment opportunities. The resulting gradual economic genocide has generated humiliating poverty for three-fourths of Latin Americans, downward mobility for shrinking intermediate classes, last-ditch fight-backs by dwindling ranks of organized labor, and waves of internal and external migration.

It has also produced a new wave of social movements and leftward electoral swings. There are, to be sure, strong counter-tendencies, including attempts to destabilize governments; counter-revolutionary plots and mobilizations; more repression and paramilitary terrorism; and accelerating violence against women, gays, transsexuals, ethnic minorities, nonconformist youth, journalists, and human rights groups.

What is at stake in Latin America is nothing less than national sovereignty and control of basic resources, including oil, gas, water, low-wage labor, biodiversity, schools, hospitals, housing, transportation, pensions, banks, and industries. The social movements are protesting the privatization of nature, the commodification of life, and the pillage imposed by neoliberal globalization, together with the illegitimate, unpayable foreign debts passed down from the dictatorships.

The presidential electoral shift from the "hard neoliberal" right to the "soft neoliberal" center is exemplified in the elections of Lula in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, even Nicanor Duarte in Paraguay who initially backed MERCOSUR, South America's alternative to FTAA that recently has incorporated Venezuela.

Similar electoral shifts are expected in upcoming elections in Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, a few smaller nations of the Caribbean Basin, and possibly even Colombia. Candidates routinely pledge not to implement free-market fundamentalism and the FTAA, even though after being elected these politicians give life support to the moribund neoliberal economic model, and in some respects strengthen it.

This is in part due to the last few decades' weakening of the state by privatization schemes, free trade pacts, and foreign debt burdens, leaving governments vulnerable to what amounts to foreign capital blackmail. That is a major reason why social movements target the IMF, World Bank, FTAA, and WTO, in addition to US and European imperialisms (Spain having passed the United States in Latin American investments).

The space for a more "humane" neoliberalism or bourgeois nationalism has disappeared. That is why Bolivia's Evo Morales and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, while on many issues cooperating with the other recently elected presidents, reject their "soft neoliberalism" approach, advocating instead revolutionary changes based on state support for the demands of the social movements.

Morales calls for a "communitarian socialism based on reciprocity and solidarity," while Chávez emphasizes the need to internationalize the revolution and create "a new socialism for the 21st

century” because “another world is not possible within capitalism.”

A striking new element of today’s social movements is their increased resistance to co-optation, their growing numbers of impoverished participants and their tactical inventiveness. Traditional class structures and modes of struggle today are barely recognizable because of neoliberalism’s slashing of state social programs and use of “flexible labor” leading to the collapse of the minimum wage, immiseration of the masses, rising unemployment, and for even well educated professionals “precariousness” of work and “over-exploitation.” The lines dividing social classes and social movements have become blurred.

For the indigenous peoples of Latin America, neoliberalism exists as “merely” the latest wrinkle in 500 years of genocidal subjection and enduring resistance. In this sense, they are aware of certain historic realities, such as the continuity of colonialism/imperialism; ecological destruction; the creation and perpetuation of an unpayable debt as a tool for dominating a people; and the routine use of kidnappings, disappearances, torture, and violence against women.

Women have borne the brunt of the economic suffering under neoliberalism, not to mention the stepped-up violence of everyday life. Protests about the escalated abuse of women and the sex trade (now an even larger economy than narco-trafficking) have become a focus of not only feminist movements like the World March of Women, but of social movements in general.

Examples of female leadership range from the Zapatista comandantas to the Argentine piqueteras (unemployed people blocking busy intersections) and Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Especially noteworthy are the women who led the nationwide outpouring to save President Hugo Chávez’s life during the two-day reign of Pedro Carmona (“Pedro El Breve”) after the US-sponsored military coup of April 11, 2002, and the Bolivian workers, street vendors, and heads of households of El Alto who have organized defense-and-struggle committees.

The role of peasants and small farmers, in spite of increased repression, has become prominent. In most cases, the multi-ethnic “peasantry” constitutes a new inexpensive, flexible, and migrant labor force. Whether Andean coca cultivators or landless workers like Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra (MST, part of the Via Campesina, a network of peasant movements in 87 countries), the rural masses have mobilized, even in the cities.

A new labor militancy has also arisen against transnational corporations and corrupted trade-union bosses (called charros in Mexico). Independent trade-union confederations like Mexico’s Authentic Labor Front (FAT) or split-offs from old confederations like the National Union of Workers (UNT) in Venezuela and Mexico are springing up everywhere. In Chile, “Workers Collectives” have begun to fill the virtual void of trade unions left by the still not completely dismantled state-terrorist Pinochet dictatorship.

As importantly, workers’ struggles are being internationalized, linking up campaigns such as that of Coca Cola workers in Guatemala, Colombia, and India, as well as the unionization fights in the maquiladoras (low-wage assembly plants) of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. Latin American workers have occupied so many factories abandoned by their owners and made them productive again that in late 2005, Venezuela hosted a continental congress for workers of recuperated factories.

There is also a growing recognition among Latin American peoples of the need to form alliances and to internationalize their struggles. Examples of the new internationalism, besides those already mentioned, include the Continental Campaign against the FTAA sponsored by the Continental Social Alliance and the campaign for the demilitarization of Latin America that Mexico’s Zapatistas began

in Chiapas in 2003 and which currently links up with the international campaign to close the more than 700 US military bases in 130 countries. The Zapatistas' "Other Campaign," initiated in 2006, also has a very internationalist perspective.

Socialism is of growing interest in Latin America. Public opinion polls in Venezuela and Brazil show more than half of each nation's population favoring socialism, a word rarely heard in countries like Chile and Mexico; but there is a growing debate about the kinds of socialisms that should be sought.

There already exists a process of initiating what might be called "two, three, many socialisms," starting with the Cuban Revolution of 1959. As the famed Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui (d. 1930) wrote, Latin Americans do not want a replica of European socialism, but instead want one based on their own reality, in Peru's case the indigenous peoples.

Thus, Cuba's socialism is distinctly Cuban, Venezuela's is rooted in the ideas of Simón Bolívar, Bolivia's is based on indigenous traditions, and Ecuador's indigenous leader Blanca Chancoso suggests "a plurinational, pluricultural state that we can build together." And the Zapatistas (who do not speak of socialism) advocate a system where all power comes from below, as in their autonomous "juntas of good government" in Chiapas.

The debates show Latin America's multiple socialist perspectives to share four characteristics: (1) Human-values driven, seeking an end to patriarchy, racism, sexism, class exploitation, and genocide, based on values of love (as in the works of Ché and José Martí), respect for others, and social justice; (2) Participatory, without Stalinist-type authoritarianism, but with multiple-level planning, worker-controlled enterprises, and "politics instead of politicking" (in the words of Fidel Castro), rooted in using the state and people's participation from below instead of "party-ocracy" or "vanguardism"; (3) Internationalist, planning both home markets and international ones, defending peoples against neoliberalism and imperialist interventions, and building veto-free inter-state organizations to promote peace and human rights; and (4) Pro-sovereignty of nation-states in defense of the principles of non-intervention, non-aggression, and self-determination, including new states created to link up many peoples (as in Bolivia and Venezuela) and ones aspiring to true "national independence" through unification into a Latin American state or confederation (as in Martí's concept of "Our America" and Bolívar's "Gran Patria").

Critical to the future of humanity and the planet will be the speed with which transitions away from neoliberal capitalism occur and the frequency of breaks, or ruptures, with capitalism. Ultimately, there can be no saving of humanity without a swiftly expanded practice of internationalism, already given new life by recent developments in Latin America and the alter-globalization movement. Internationalism is a process of human solidarity and exchange of experiences, learning from "the other." People in what Martí called "the belly of the beast," that is, the United States, have a chance to make a critical difference.

All will depend on how much unity and internationalism can be built among the social movements and among different governments in the face of imperialism's stepped-up pressures. Debates about Latin American socialisms, even among the supporters of the Zapatista "Other Campaign," are based on the principle of creating ecologically responsible states of "people's power," where the people (or in Zapatista language, those of below) are, in the words of Venezuela's new Constitution, the "protagonists." All agree on the overarching goal: to liberate humanity, celebrate life, honor death, and save the planet.

P.S.

* Published by International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 379 - June 2006. This article will

soon be published in LiP magazine.

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