

The conservative offensive and the return of class war in Latin America

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Several countries in Latin America are currently experiencing very powerful class conflicts and extremely violent repression on the part of reactionary forces and the state. The following report is an overview by Franck Gaudichaud on the situation in various countries and the dynamics of their struggles.

Antoine Pelletier: A few months ago, the “end” of the progressive cycle in Latin America was being announced. Now, it seems that a new situation is beginning to emerge. On the one hand, the ruling classes are on the offensive, on the other, resistance to neoliberalism is expressing itself in the streets and at the polls.

Franck Gaudichaud: Indeed, there has been a debate about whether we are witnessing *sensu stricto* the so-called end of cycle of progressive, national popular or center-left governments: from the wrenching end of the Workers Party (PT) government of Brazil to the endless crisis in the Venezuela of Nicolás Maduro, passing through Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador.... In reality, more than an “end,” we are witnessing the turbulent reflux of these experiences, and what emerges ever more clearly are the strategic limits and contradictions of these different projects and their political regimes. I wrote about this in a recent essay Jeff Webber and Massimo Modonesi [1]. It is especially apparent that, with the world economic crisis and the more or less profound exhaustion of the neo-developmental and progressive neo-extractivist projects in some countries, we have entered a chaotic and difficult juncture in which the ruling classes, the conservative sectors, the media elites, the financial bourgeoisie, the evangelical churches, and the militarist extreme right are on the offensive. This is particularly true after the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, a key country in regional geo-strategy. This victory came in the wake of the triumph of the parliamentary *coup d'état* against Dilma Rousseff and later with the illegal and illegitimate imprisonment of Lula.

At the same time, this conservative and/or reactionary offensive has not stabilized; it seems that the ruling classes have not found the key to settling back in power with the backing of a rough social consensus under a new neoliberal-authoritarian hegemony. In Argentina, the neoliberal Mauricio Macri has been dislodged by the ballot box and his mandate has been marked by a dramatic economic collapse, despite - or rather we should say because of - the gigantic IMF intervention led by Christine Lagarde. In Mexico, a *late progressivism* appeared with the victory of López Obrador (center-left), who surely will not be able to carry out the great transformation he has announced, but which, nevertheless, constitutes a relative brake compared with the previous neoliberal presidents. In Venezuela, the offensive by the opposition (which was barely supported by Washington) with Juan Guaidó's self-proclamation and the economic suffocation of the country, failed terribly. However, the Maduro government remains enormously weakened and continues to be marked by authoritarianism, mismanagement, and massive corruption, nor is it capable of overcoming its economic crisis when, at the same time, U.S. sanctions weigh heavily on daily life. But, a fundamental fact for the Venezuelan government is that the Bolivarian Armed Forces have remained loyal to president Maduro. Another example of the current contradictory situation is Uruguay, where

conservatives (with support from the extreme-military right) just put an end to fifteen years of social democratic governments led by the Frente Amplio after a narrow victory in the second round of the elections.

Faced with this non-stabilized conservative offensive, discontented popular forces and collective resistance have recovered, expressing themselves indirectly at the polls with, for example, the Peronist victory in Argentina. But, above all, this resistance is expressed from below, through multiple on-going social struggles. And on top of this, we have the great democratic victory of Lula's release (though legal proceedings continue) in Brazil. In short, there is a very powerful recomposition of the class struggle that sets up a period marked by uncertainty, both from the point of view of the elites and of the popular classes. The latter are trying to reorganize themselves, but with weakened forces and without always taking critical stock of the previous period, that of the progressive "golden age" (2002-2013). Another important fact is the extent of state repression and the criminalization of popular movements marked by dozens of deaths throughout the region (from Chile to Honduras to Bolivia), where torture, rape, and femicides are carried out by a militarized police, along with forced disappearances and illegal detentions. From my point of view, there is a political urgency for us in Europe to think about a broad and united campaign of international solidarity to put an immediate end to these practices of state terrorism. We must figure out how to increase the pressure on our own governments and the European Union, which looks the other way and fully supports the states responsible for these systematic violations of fundamental rights.

A. P.: Chile, Ecuador, Haiti and now Colombia, the list of popular movements is getting longer. What can you tell us about these movements, their roots and perspectives?

F. G.: According to various observers, after the Arab Spring and the movement of the *indignados* in the Spanish state, we are living in a context of global revolts and the Latin American insurrections are resonating in Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Hong Kong, and even the yellow vests of France. Perhaps I'm generalizing too much, but this is a resistance against neoliberalism and against authoritarianism in a context of crisis of legitimacy of the current political systems perceived as dominated by political "castes" where clientelism, arrogance, and corruption reign. If we talk about Chile, Haiti, Ecuador, and Colombia this is very clear. However, these are not *generalized* struggles, they depend first and foremost on local conditions and relations of national forces (even if there are real mutual influences, especially via social networks and similar political actions). This rejection of the "system" has different dimensions, more or less powerfully, depending on the country. The question of corruption is central in Haiti while that of the economic model and authoritarianism is central in Chile, Ecuador, and Colombia. These crises are born of the generalized precarization of life, nature, and work in the neoliberal era in the global south. We must take the pulse of discontent accumulated over decades, of the daily difficulties for millions of people to live and obtain housing in the big cities, to take the pulse of the rural areas that are polluted and controlled by multinationals, etc. We must also understand the scope of the anger from below when they see that very undemocratic political regimes are unable to respond to their needs and expectations while wealth accumulates at one end of society. In the case of Chile, the movement demands nothing less than an end to Pinochet's Constitution, which is still in force today in 2019.

A. P.: The petty bourgeoisie (the middle classes) plays an important role in popular demonstrations, but with different trajectories.

F. G.: In Chile, we are witnessing first and foremost an explosion of precarious youth, students from middle schools, high schools and colleges, often very young. They jumped the subway turnstiles and refused to pay the thirty cents increase for the most expensive subway in the world (in relation to purchasing power). Indeed, these are young people from popular sectors or the precarious middle classes. Overall, in the countries of the global south, broad layers of the "petty bourgeoisie" are very

precarious, in debt, without stable employment and - in some circumstances - they end up following and accompanying the popular mobilizations. An important element is the level of education. Today, Latin American youth (urban but also rural) are more educated than before, more connected to social networks, less affiliated to political parties and unions than in the seventies, and they enter the struggle in a more or less spontaneous and very *explosive* way in the face of immediate measures, although obviously at different times in each country.

The anti-neoliberal, anti-authoritarian, democratic content of the current social movements is very clear in Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, and now in Colombia, with a large general strike that had not been seen for decades. At the same time, there are essential local ingredients. For example, the question of the peace process in Colombia that the Duque government and former president Uribe have tried to undermine by all means. In Chile, Piñera's elitist arrogance and the presence of the army in the streets have accelerated mobilizations (reactivating the traumatic memory of Pinochet's dictatorship). In Ecuador, the Moreno government (originating in the center-left Alianza País) aligned itself with neoliberalism, the IMF, the United States, and the bosses of the Guayaquil region. In Haiti, the driving factor is a rejection of the corrupt political ruling caste and president Jovenel, but the consequences of fifteen years of occupation by United Nations troops, particularly Brazilian soldiers plays a role as well.

Bolivia took a different path. There is also a real accumulated social discontent there, not in the face of neoliberalism, but rather in the face of the caudillismo of Evo Morales, who ran for a fourth term thanks to a somewhat controversial decision by the constitutional court and despite the result of the 2016 referendum [in which his proposal to do so was defeated]. During fourteen years of *Evismo*, poverty has decreased very significantly and a more social and plurinational state has been built, yet there is also criticism of the extractivist development model followed by Morales and a growing separation between government management and part of the popular movement. However, the fundamental fact that explains the *coup d'état* against Evo is the far right's success - led by the civic committee of Santa Cruz and reactionary evangelical currents - in capitalizing on popular discontent. Luis Fernando Camacho, the neo-fascist leader of the eastern plains, took advantage of MAS's (Movement Towards Socialism) weakness after it partially lost its capacity to mobilize its historic base. Camacho lead a heterogeneous movement that included popular sectors, latifundistas, indigenous organizations, and employers. So this is a different balance of forces. One that includes a turn by part of the new middle classes to support the coup because, after taking advantage of MAS's effective economic management, of a threefold increase in GDP, the middle classes adopted expectations that the MAS could not meet. At the same time, the profoundly clientelistic management of the relations between the popular organizations and the MAS (which more than a party is a kind of federation of social organizations) did not help protect the government against this type of destabilization. Finally, it is necessary to develop and understand in detail the role of imperialism in the coup, which appears more decisive every day, not only through the OAS (Organization of American States) in denouncing electoral fraud, but also through active support, since 2005, for right-wing sectors and the separatists of the eastern part of Bolivia who had sought to overthrow Morales.

A. P.: The feminist movement seems especially powerful in Latin America. Can you talk about a new "feminist wave" that is sweeping the whole continent?

F. G.: Women's struggles and the feminist movement are key factors in the recomposition of the class struggle and the antagonistic popular movements in the region. They are strongly anchored in the youth, and not just with students. They have managed to establish links with a part of the trade union movement and the peasant movement. This can be seen, for example, in the importance of the women's and feminist movement in the popular struggles of Brazil and the Landless Workers Movement (MST).

At the same time, it is a broad, continental, transnational movement with local specificities. The Argentine dynamic had an influence in Chile, especially with the powerful “Ni una menos” movement and with the struggle for abortion rights, with the symbol of the green scarf that became an international emblem. This movement spilled over national borders and inspired the Chilean feminist struggles on the other side of the Cordillera. Women in Chile have their own demands and dynamics, especially after the university movement in 2018 with the massive occupation of universities against sexual abuse and sexist education. The movement in Chile was triggered by the great strike of March 2019 and the prior creation of the Coordinadora del 8 de Marzo that brings together dozens of organizations. The Latin American feminist movement of the last epoch demonstrated that it is possible to articulate a united and radical approach, becoming a mass and popular movement. In my opinion, it embodies a great hope for any profound democratic transformation, not only anti-patriarchal but also de-colonial and anti-capitalist. It is a movement that defines itself against the precariousness of life and integrates workers, migrants, indigenous demands, LGBTQI+ struggles, etc.

In Mexico, the struggle against neoliberal violence and the large number of femicides (and not only in Ciudad Juárez) constituted a central axis of this movement that has, up until now, not transformed itself into a massive national movement. There were also advances in the decriminalization of abortion (in the state of Oaxaca and in Mexico City). In Brazil, the feminist struggles emerged with the “Ele Não” campaign (Not Him) against the rise of Bolsonaro, continuing with the great *march of the daisies* by hundreds of thousands of rural women in August 2019. The latter was a enormous march, born out of peasant community feminism. It is broadly connected with the role played by militants of the more urban, radical left, such as Marielle Franco, who was murdered by the henchmen of Bolsonaro.

There is a new feminist *wave* but not in the European or American sense. Rather, it is a very important historical moment for the struggles of women and feminisms (which are pluralist), with some influences coming from the north, from the Spanish state, and the feminist strike that unites theorists like Silvia Federici, Cinzia Arruzza and others, but which starts from and, above all, is anchored in the specificities of Indo-Afro-Latin America.

A. P.: Other especially important actors in Latin America are the peasant and indigenous movements. How can one understand the progressive role of these forces and in particular their relationship to the workers movement?

F. G.: Today we are commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the emergence of the indigenous, peasant, anti-neoliberal, and anti-capitalist neo-Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas. I believe that it would be of great merit to draw lessons from this crucial experiment and also reactivate solidarity networks with the Zapatista process, one that has lasted a quarter of a century in a territory as large as Belgium, one that undertook the construction of an important alternative experience and constructed alternative livelihoods in a world on the verge of collapse. The Zapatista movement has managed to resist the Mexican military forces and to construct, in a positive way, a new account of how to try, not without difficulty, to forge a post-capitalist perspective, being open to all internationalist struggles, connected with the Kurdish people and with many other struggles, setting in motion the question of communalism, but from the coordinates of the Mayan peoples of Chiapas, elaborating the confluence between the indigenous territories and the construction of an innovative democratic political power, etc. This experience is fundamental for thinking about alternatives for the twenty-first century. Of course, there are limits and many unresolved problems (especially in the economic plane), as has been recognized by the Zapatistas. The relationship with other Mexican leftists is also often difficult. But when we review the collapse of Chavismo in Venezuela, the absence of structural transformations in Argentina, the trajectory of the PT in Brazil or of the Frente Amplio in Uruguay, we must recognize that the balance of fifteen years of

progressivism is quite limited and contradictory. So, in my opinion, we have to return to the Zapatista experience and its conception of power from below without falling into the strategic siren song of “changing the world without taking power.” Instead, let’s change the world by transforming power, as Zapatismo seems to tell us.

In relation to the actors mobilized across the rest of the subcontinent, one could venture that we are witnessing the return of a *plebeian emergence*, similar to the late 1990s or early 2000s, during the great confrontations with neoliberalism, for example, with the CONAIE [2] in Ecuador, the dynamics of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, the water war and the gas war in Bolivia, the call for elites to step down (*qué se vayan todos*) in 2001 in Argentina and similar urban revolts like the Caracazo in Venezuela. These are different actors, arising from social formations in which “the people” includes a great multiplicity of class fractions. In the last few weeks, we once again saw mobilized – depending on the country – indigenous and working-class movements, the homeless, unemployed people (the piqueteros), young people, the same ones who initiated the *post-neoliberal* political cycle at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Today we are witnessing a new plebeian explosion in which indigenous people, as we have seen in Ecuador, play a central role where they have shaken Lenín Moreno’s neoconservative government. In Brazil, we will have to see how the MST is going to position itself because its ties with the PT have been very strong for a long time, yet overall, these ties have paralyzed it. Nevertheless, with the movement against the dams (MBA), the movement of the daisies, the eco-territorial struggles around the Amazon and the offensive of the extreme right, there is a re-activation of resistance. The peasant and indigenous sectors are at the center of neoliberal attacks, they are also among those disappointed by the progressive governments and, therefore, they constitute a very important actor. While Evo Morales and Garcia Linera are in exile in Mexico, it is the Red Ponchos [3] who are on the offensive in response to the ultra-violent dimension of the *coup d’état* in Bolivian.

None of this should discount worker and urban resistance, these are critical because they are the heart of the capital-labor relationship. In Ecuador, it has been the unity of urban and indigenous movements that has nationalized the dynamics of the revolt against Lenín Moreno. In Chile, the movement emerged, above all, from the urban populations, from the urbanized and educated youth, from a part of the petty bourgeoisie, but also from unions: the Unión Portuaria de Chile (port workers union) is at the center of the current revolt and of the national strikes and is part of the union organizations in the Social Unity Roundtable which feeds this rebellion. In my opinion, this is where we are going to find a way out of the Chilean crisis: the capacity of the working class to mobilize nationally and to bring the economy to a standstill will be decisive in the battle against Piñera and against state repression, which is at an unprecedented level since 1990.

But there are also contradictions. For instance, in Bolivia, a part of the leadership of the Central Obrera (COB) called for Morales’ resignation to “pacify the country,” in fact, siding with the military and, therefore, supporting the *coup d’état*! The workers’ movement is not always ready for the struggle, far from it. The big union federations, the Chilean CUT, the Brazilian CUT, are having major difficulties when it comes to articulating plans for a resistance movement against extreme right-wing or neoliberal governments because, for some time, they have served as conveyor belts for various “progressive” parties in office. And one of the challenges of this period will be precisely to rebuild a combative unionism independent of institutions, rooted in workplaces and localities.

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P.S.

Interview with Franck Gaudichaud by Antoine Pelletier. Gaudichaud is professor of Latin American history at the University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès (France) and he is also member of the editorial board of *Contretemps* magazine. Originally published in *VientoSur*. English translation by Héctor A. Rivera for No Border News and *PuntoRojo* magazine

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<https://nobordersnews.org/2019/12/10/franck-gaudichaud-the-conservative-offensive-and-the-return-of-class-war-in-latin-america/>

Footnotes

[1] His book with Webber and Modonesi is available online in Spanish at:
http://ciid.politicas.unam.mx/www/libros/gobiernos_progresistas_electronico.pdf

[2] Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (NdeIT).

[3] “Militia” of the Aymara ethnicity, originating in the Lake Titicaca region at the crossroads of Bolivia, Peru, Argentina and Chile (NdeIT).