

Prologue

The Crisis of Civilisation and challenges for the left

Miriam Lang¹

The multi-faceted crisis sweeping the world has worsened in the last few years. Financial markets have managed to weaken even the strongest economies in the industrialised countries. The grabbing of agricultural land for financial speculation or agrofuel production is aggravating the rise in food prices and leading us into a food crisis. The technologies used to extract oil, gas and minerals from the most remote corners of the planet are becoming more and more expensive, risky and environmentally destructive: the sea bed is being drilled at a depth of several kilometres, sands are being stripped of their small percentage of tar to produce oil, chemicals are being pumped into rocks to release natural gas, gigantic craters are being dug to extract the mere 0.1% of copper that the soil contains. These practices are essential to maintain a specific way of life – the idea of success and happiness proposed by the global North for the whole of humanity, whose hegemony is currently unquestionable.

The consequences of this capitalist onslaught on the farthest reaches of the planet – which have hitherto remained outside the logic of endless accumulation – are being felt above all in the peripheral regions of the world. It is there that smallholder farmers pushed off their land – now destined for more “profitable” uses – are moving directly into poverty or destitution; and it is there that the rise in basic food prices translates immediately into hunger. It is there, too, that global warming is causing thousands of deaths due to drought, desertification, floods or storms. Although this book does not address the issue specifically, climate change invariably has grave social and economic consequences – aggravating other crises, creating new speculative markets, and thus generating an apparently interminable crisis feedback loop.

From the periphery, this multi-faceted crisis has been recognised as a “crisis of civilisation”. Social movements in the global South are not only resisting the ongoing onslaught of “accumulation by dispossession”, they are also voicing the urgency of looking for fundamental alternatives to the current world system. And urgent it is, because the pace of destruction of the planet under the mantra of economic growth is speeding up, as the financial markets demand profits in an increasingly short space of time.

Mainstream thinking, however, fails to take into account either the planet’s

physical limits – and consequently the limits of its capacity to absorb pollution and waste – or the inevitable finiteness of the natural assets that the capitalist system has at its disposal. It continues to offer us more expansion, more growth, and increasingly sophisticated technological solutions to natural disasters and the energy crisis. With the so-called ‘green economy’, the system has already identified the way to its next modernising leap forward: the commercialisation of nature itself and of its conservation, the sale of pollution rights, and investment in renewable energies or harm-mitigation technologies, where all this promises juicy profits for the futures markets. As ever in capitalism, each crisis is an opportunity: there will be losers – probably more of them than ever – but the system itself will regenerate, and thus will seek to assert its superiority over any alternative.

In this global scenario, the political constellations in Latin America are exceptional. In the Andean region alone, four out of five countries now have governments whose stated aim is to break away from the neoliberal model and put an end to the shameless plundering practised until recently by the old elites. Three countries – Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela – have drawn up new constitutions collectively. Their new governments were only able to win elections as a result of lengthy processes of social struggle, whose protagonists were neither the traditional left nor political parties, but social movements of smallholder farmers, women, city-dwellers and indigenous peoples, who managed to transcend their sectoral demands and put forward new proposals for the country as a whole. None of these progressive governments emerged from traditional parties; instead, they were backed by new or alternative political structures.

This new political class was the first in decades to genuinely concern itself with its country’s future, including education, poverty reduction and improving the quality of life of its people. It was also the first to propose new rules of the game for the transnational corporations that had been accustomed to systematically helping themselves to these countries’ natural assets. It proposed new visions of regional integration, more independent than the various neocolonial arrangements. It offered to build economic alternatives to the extractivist rationale that has prevailed for more than five centuries, according to which Latin America is merely the source of raw materials for the enrichment of the global North.

With the Constituent Assemblies in the three countries, these processes of change experienced their most democratic, most effervescent and most participatory moment. The task was nothing less than to found the country anew and – in the case of Ecuador and Bolivia – to transform it into a plurinational state, meaning the transformation of the post-colonial state to reflect the diversity of nationalities and peoples. However, neither the processes of drafting the new constitution,

nor the subsequent implementation of the new constitutional precepts, were able to escape from the enormous pressures resulting from the involvement of these countries in the current world system. This includes internal and external pressures in the economy, and others resulting from the weighty inheritance of states that are profoundly colonial and excluding in their design and their practices, as well as being highly skilled in appropriating transformative social energy to serve their own ends.

A few years down the line, the processes of change in Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela today are still characterised by a decisive break with the neoliberal era, but their risks and limitations are also evident. They are all undergoing serious internal conflicts which – in the opinion of some – may even put an end to them, at least in electoral terms.

What is at stake in these conflicts takes us directly to the “crisis of civilisation” scenario mentioned before. The new constitutional and legal precepts – collective and territorial rights, indigenous peoples’ right to prior consultation, the rights of Nature and respect for *Pachamama* – clash head on with the aggressive demand for raw materials in the world’s old and new hegemonic centres. The notable increase in social investment to improve education, health and infrastructure, and fight for social inclusion of the poorest, requires immediate funding which is obtained either by expanding the old extractivist model or by running up the external debt again.

Social conflicts such as those experienced in Ecuador as a result of the new Mining Law and Water Law of 2009, or the recent conflict in Bolivia around the proposal to build a major highway right through the middle of the TIPNIS national park and ancestral indigenous territory, exemplify the profound contradictions hampering change. These contradictions carve out divisions at the heart of the progressive governments themselves. Far from being homogeneous blocs, these governments are battlegrounds between factions with different interests and allies who are fighting for a variety of national projects. Thus, the governments themselves end up violating the same Constitutions that only recently represented their greatest political success,² and coming into confrontation, on a fairly serious scale, with significant numbers of their own grassroots supporters who brought them to power, not just by means of their vote but through their accumulated historical struggles.

Today, it can be said that within most of the progressive governments, to differing degrees, the factions that were committed to a profound transformation of the social and economic model in their countries are now in the minority, while

those coming to the fore are seeking a much more pragmatic form of change and are more in favour of a simple modernisation of capitalism.

Nevertheless, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos rightly says, as a result of the constitutional processes in these countries:

“We now have concepts and ideas that we didn’t have ten years ago and that can’t be underrated, such as the concept of *Buen Vivir* (‘Living Well’), the concept of *Pachamama*, the rights of nature, as well as the legalisation of indigenous peoples’ communal lands. (...) The idea that property is not just state property or individual capitalist property and that there are other forms of property is a great novelty. (...) In Bolivia there’s the idea that we have three forms of democracy: representative democracy, participatory democracy and community democracy, which each have their own rationales and must be coordinated. We have new means to wage an ideological battle.”³

In addition to this is the fact that Bolivia and Ecuador have been declared Plurinational States in their respective Constitutions, thus opening up a significant possibility of legitimately building decolonised societies and institutions that reflect this diversity in their structures, their production of knowledge and their practices.

On this basis, in addition to criticising and resisting the predatory onslaught of today’s capitalism, the left has the task of developing new proposals and visions, challenging the thinking that still longs to join a life of boundless consumerism, and breaking its hegemony. The task is to initiate new debates about what concepts as vital as happiness or quality of life might mean from another perspective, and to transform another world into something imaginable.

The Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development

It was with the purpose of contributing to this task that the Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development was set up in the Andean region at the start of 2010. The working group is coordinated from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation’s regional office in Quito, and brings together women and men from eight countries in Latin America and Europe, although its analyses focus on Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela. It seeks to link intellectual production from various academic disciplines and schools of thought – ecology, feminism, anti-

capitalist economics, socialism, indigenous and subaltern western thinking – which question the very concept of development and seek to build alternatives to the current hegemonic development model.

This working group represents an effort to practice an ecology of knowledge, based on the confluence of concrete experiences – not just the experiences of activists in various spheres of civil society, but also those of working in the institutions of the inherited state, the ancestral knowledge of indigenous cultures that have subsisted outside the hegemonic system, and the critical thinking of intellectuals from different disciplines.

This book is a first result of the group's work. Its debates build on a basic agreement: that the range of the changes and political strategies we need surpasses the limits of alternatives proposed within the hegemonic concept of development. In this sense, the group's name, "alternatives to development," indicates a political position with regard to this concept which, historically, has usually been perceived in Latin American countries as something positive.

Symbolically, development is linked to a promise of well-being, happiness and a better quality of life. The members of the working group, however, believe that development inevitably ties us to a certain way of thinking – one that is western, capitalist and colonial. This is because it seeks to get the excluded to follow a path marked out in advance by the global North, in order to achieve their inclusion in the hegemonic way of life.

Historically, after the Second World War, and as part of a new pattern of North-South relations which replaced the old colonial relationship, the world began to be divided into developed and underdeveloped countries. According to Michel Foucault's theory and the analysis of Arturo Escobar,⁴ development is a power device which reorganised the world, giving new legitimacy to the international division of labour in the capitalist context, by means of an immense set of discourses and practices. Development was transformed into a public policy objective. Budgets were allocated and a multiplicity of institutions set up to promote development at the local, national and international level. In the universities, countless courses sprang up to train specialists in development, which might be rural, sustainable, international, etc. In Northern countries, what used to be economic policies to deal with the colonies were re-worded in the terms of "international development cooperation."

Development also ties us to a technocratic, quantitativist, economic toolkit that has permeated public policies all over the world, and to environmentally

destructive practices that have taken us to the current limits of the planet. Another effect of the device is that it perpetuates the devaluing of the multiple ways of life, social relationships and knowledge systems that exist in the South, which are classified as “backward.” Consequently, the introduction of the category of underdevelopment also forged “underdeveloped” subjectivities in the global South.

Both the capitalist economic model and the 20th century’s great alternative project were rooted in notions of development. The “real-socialist” governments in Eastern Europe, in common with the majority of thinkers on the left in Latin America, concentrated on criticising imperialism and capitalism as such, but they tacitly accepted the concept of development as the path to “progress” for the people. They did not analyse it as one of the key devices for cementing and expanding capitalism and its colony-producing logic, which equates well-being solely with people’s capacity to consume.

However, this later changed: starting in the 1970s, important critiques of the concept of development have been formulated, and in recent years, with the debate on the concept of *Buen Vivir* (a term in Spanish that can be translated as “living well,” but with a distinctive meaning in the Latin American and particularly indigenous context), a current of thinking is emerging outside of the developmentalist, modernist, economistic and linear framework. Eduardo Gudynas outlines this for us in his essay “Debates on development and alternatives to it in Latin America: a brief heterodox guide,” in this book. A second chapter, “Development critiques and alternatives: a feminist perspective,” complements this analysis from a feminist perspective.

In parallel with these theoretical and academic critiques, there have been a series of local forms of resistance to developmentalist thinking, which have led to the building of alternative practices in different contexts: life plans, agroecological production and marketing networks, exchange networks, alternative forms of neighbourhood organisation and mobilisation in cities, etc. These experiences are an important basis for any prospect of actual transition, and some of them are represented in the Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development, which seeks to explore the learning arising from them in more depth.

Finally, in the last few years, social protest movements in Latin America have undergone an “ecoterritorial shift” and reconfigured themselves around the defence of territory and natural resources. This is analysed by Maristella Svampa in her chapter, “Resource extractivism and alternatives: Latin American perspectives on development.”

A key issue in the Permanent Working Group's debates is the so-called "Latin American paradox," which refers to the fact that Latin America's progressive governments, who seek to present themselves as revolutionary, are endorsing and promoting extractivism – large-scale mining and the oil and gas industry in particular – as the basic development model for their economies. The group argues that, in the current context, it is essential to talk about agribusiness and agrofuels as well, as these promote an extractivist rationale by consolidating the natural resources export model, increasing the amount of land under agriculture and accelerating the tendency to practice monocropping.

Another of the characteristics of the extractivist model in the region is that its uncritical implementation is leading to the consolidation of economies that once again focus on the production of primary commodities - based on enclave economies - with scant local or national linkages and a dominant presence of transnational companies with few tax responsibilities, despite the nationalisation initiatives that have been advanced. As Alberto Acosta points out in his chapter, "Extractivism and neoextractivism: two sides of the same curse," this is an activity in which the value of the products obtained does not include their social and environmental costs. Instead, these costs are externalised and borne by a society without democratic rights in the transnational corporate world. Acosta analyses the close link that exists, for Latin America, between development aims and extractivism, as well as the political and social consequences of this link.

Going deeper into the debate about the Latin American paradox, Edgardo Lander and Ulrich Brand analyse the role that the state can play in processes of change. These processes in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela are all characterised by restoring the state's regulatory and management role, but this does not necessarily lead to the inherited development model being overcome. Having governments that enjoy a high degree of popular legitimacy does not mean that the state has changed its colonial mindset. The group's debates repeatedly suggest the need to differentiate between today's public administrations in the three countries, and the projects to transform the state and move towards a post-development construction of society. What type of transformations would be desirable and possible in the framework of the Plurinational State and its perspectives? Is it really within the state that these transformations can be taken forward? Can mining, rentier, extractivist states really be the instruments or agents of a process of change? How diverse are the state apparatuses? Which of those apparatuses support processes of change and which hamper them?

Because the state plays such a key role in the new governments' discourse on

change, it is crucial to analyse the disputes that are taking place there, and what interests are imposing themselves within it.

The final section of the book seeks to mark out pathways of transition toward the construction of alternatives, taking as the utopian horizon the concept of *buen vivir* or *vivir bien*, examined in this book by Raúl Prada from Bolivia. This concept, in its sense of a critique of development, emerges as a sphere of transformation under construction that would lead us to other civilisatory perspectives in which new ways of life take shape and which aim to break the bounds of today's rationalism, questioning the ideological foundations of a linear history of progress and development. *Buen Vivir* arises from actions in which the individual is always part of the community, and is directly related to the political projects of decolonisation and de-patriarchalisation (dismantling patriarchy). Along these lines, the group has insisted on the need to think of the range of possibilities of *Buen Vivir* from the perspective of concrete experiences, from the multiplicity of contexts and the diversity of identities, situations and references. The text by Elisa Vega is an example of this, both because of her personal experience as an indigenous woman, and from her experience of formulating public policies in the Office for De-patriarchalisation, part of the Vice-Ministry of Decolonisation in Bolivia.

Finally, in the framework of the sphere of desired transformations, Eduardo Gudynas traces a path of possible transitions in his second essay, "Transitions to post-extractivism: directions, options, areas of action." He proposes a strategy of gradually moving away from the extractivist model that would imply following a path in stages from the current phase of *predatory extractivism*, passing through an intermediate phase that he calls *sensible extractivist activities*, in order to arrive at a final phase of *indispensable extractivist activities*.

This book is merely a first contribution to the building of alternatives to development – a path we share with an increasing number of social actors in Latin America who are aware of the need to look for ways out of the crisis of civilisation. One of the most important challenges being debated in the Permanent Working Group, which will be addressed in future publications, is how to build the practice of *Buen Vivir* in urban areas, as this is where the majority of the population lives and, at the same time, the bastion of the hegemonic way of life.

This task of building proposals, of looking for pathways, is particularly challenging for a left whose strength has historically been criticism, which tends to define itself from a negative standpoint, by division and demarcation. At this juncture, however, we need to be uniting our efforts, looking for strengths

rather than weaknesses in the other, in order to think what has hitherto seemed unthinkable.

Notes

1. Miriam Lang is the director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Andean Region Office. She has a PhD in Sociology from the Free University of Berlin, with a specialisation in Gender Studies, and a Masters in Latin American Studies. Her experience includes working with a wide range of women's and indigenous people's organisations in Latin America.
2. For example, several former members of Ecuador's Constituent Assembly say that the Mining Law approved in 2009 violates the 2008 Constitution, while the Constitutional Court ruled in 2010 that it was constitutional but only under certain conditions, and ordered consultations to be carried out before the enactment of legislation.
3. Interview with Boaventura de Sousa Santos in "El cuento de la economía verde" (América Latina en Movimiento, September-October 2011, Quito, Ecuador).
4. See Foucault's work on power devices, as well as Arturo Escobar's work *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).