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# The Latin American Left Between Governability and Change



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## A NEW LATIN AMERICAN REALITY

Latin America has entered a new political conjuncture. In 1997, more than 60 million Latin Americans lived in municipalities governed by the left.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, they are more than 200 million, with two national governments in addition to Cuba: Venezuela since 1999 and Brazil since 2003.

The electoral force of the left is a relevant indicator of the new political moment, but it is neither sufficient as an expression nor as an explanation for that moment. It could even lead to mistaken conclusions, such as the supposition that the electoral force of the left in itself means an absolute decline of conservative forces in Latin America. While such signs of the advance of popular forces justly inspire hope and enthusiasm, this should not obscure the complexity of the region's political processes.

At this new conjuncture, the electoral rise of the left expresses a new social and political reality, defined fundamentally by the ascent of popular struggles and the endurance of resistance to neo-liberalism. Sometimes, this new reality is manifest in popular uprisings able to stop privatisations, reverse unpopular policies and bring down presidents. In some cases, such struggles have been the immediate precursors to electoral success. This ample and diverse panorama of struggles does not always correlate with elections, however, and the actors are not necessarily tied to the left parties that participate in electoral processes.

In January 2000, an indigenous revolt in Ecuador removed president Jamil Mahuad from office. In April 2000, a popular uprising in Cochabamba, Bolivia, stopped the privatisation of water. In February 2001, the Dignity March summoned by the Zapatista National Liberation Army mobilised millions of Mexicans across the country. In December 2001, popular uprisings in Argentina overthrew president Fernando de la Rúa and three other presidents in 15 days. In April 2002, Venezuelan grassroots organisations reversed a coup d'état. Between May 2002 and February 2003, an uninterrupted nation-wide mobilisation in Bolivia resisted antipopular economic policies, demanded a Constituent National Assembly, and established the social basis for the almost successful presidential candidacy of Evo Morales in 2002. In June 2002, a popular uprising in Arequipa, Peru, stopped the privatisation of electricity. In the same month, social mobilisations in Paraguay halted the privatisation of telecommunications, electricity, water, and railroads, and prevented the approval of an 'Antiterrorist Law'. In August 2002, the communal farmers (ejidatarios) of San Salvador Atenco, Mexico, prevented the construction of a mega airport and halted the expropriation of their land. In August 2002, unionised medical doctors and workers of El Salvador launched a seven-month strike against the privatisation of social security. In September 2002, one month before Brazil's presidential elections, a popular plebiscite against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) rejected the proposal of the hemispheric liberalisation of trade with the participation of ten million citizens. In Colombia, in the middle of the war intensified by the Plan Colombia, unions organised a general strike on 16 September 2002, and in October 2003 the citizens reject a referendum imposed by President Alvaro Uribe. In Vieques, Puerto Rico, after years of resistance, civil society organisations expelled the United States Navy from their island in April 2003. And between February and October 2003 a broad coalition of Bolivian social and political movements engaged in the so-called *Guerra del Gas* (the 'gas war') stopped the loss of sovereignty over national energy



reserves and forced President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada to resign. These are only some of the most recent and well-known examples, but many more similar struggles from across the region could be mentioned.

Therefore, to speak of the Latin American left always entails the risk of generalisations which obscure the specificities of each political actor, the historical conditions in which it was constituted and took on an identity; the social and political variables that define it, and the concrete circumstances in which it operates. When we speak of parties, it is necessary to further specify ideological distinctions, degrees of internal organisation and homogeneity, the bond and roots they have with social sectors they seek to represent, or the extent of elaboration and development of their political projects.

Nowadays, analysis of the Latin American left has to go beyond the habitual references to the parties of greater consolidation or longer tradition. If we include in our definition of the left those who struggle against exploitation, marginalisation and the plunder of national wealth by transnational capital, we observe a left much bigger and more diverse than traditional left parties, even though objectives may coincide in general terms. From the mid-1990s, politically significant new left organisations have emerged. Some do not participate in the representative system, like the Zapatista National Liberation Army of Mexico. Others challenge right-wing state and national governments, but are born of specific social movements from which they extend popular representation without losing their original identities. This is the case with the Pachakutik Movement, for instance, which was constituted in 1995 as the political instrument of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, and participated in the government presided over by Lucio Gutiérrez. It is also the case with the Bolivian Movement for Socialism (MAS), created in 1998, rooted in the indigenous movement, farmers, and miners, and nearly victorious in the 2002 presidential race with its candidate Evo Morales, an Aymara indigenous leader. It is also the case with the Alternative Social Block, born in 1999 from an alliance of indigenous and peasant organisations with trade unions, students, urban residents, and left parties in the context of a 26-day regional general strike, which resulted in the Guambio indigenous leader Floro Tunubalá being elected governor of the Cauca province in Colombia in 2000. And this has been the case with the Fifth Republic Movement in Venezuela, with its origins in a heterogeneous alliance between military sectors and diverse left groups, supported by a wide range of popular sectors, all united in the common objective of ending the traditional bi-party system that had monopolised government since 1958, which they achieved with the election of Hugo Chávez as president in 1998.

The left's range of political action is much broader than electoral contestation. Electoral politics currently enjoy a greater vitality, however, as the left has seized on the possibilities for challenging governments to the right in the face of both the failure and amplified rejection of neo-liberalism. The probability of turning those electoral advances into possibilities for changing present Latin American reality requires more than securing numerous parliamentary seats and municipal or even national governments. It will also depend on the left being able to wield sufficient political force to focus organised collective will on changing the power relations across social life through which neo-liberal capitalism reproduces itself.



Neo-liberalism is not only a set of economic and social policies carried out by conservative government administrations. It is the overwhelming power of capital over work, which has prevailed by dispersing labour as a collective subject, systematically undermining labour organisations, and in the process liquidating the capacity to resist exploitation and domination and destroying the relative social and political force of workers. The military dictatorships of the three previous decades were the most violent beginning of this modification of the relative power of capital over labour, in favour of the former. It was under the representative regimes, however, that this process was deepened radically. It was during the 1990s, under democracies, that the greatest exploitation in the modern history of Latin America was carried out, within each country and from the centres of global capitalist power.

Behind cold statistics lies the impunity of a predatory capitalism that is not the result of a spontaneous or metaphysical process, but the concrete result of the change in the correlation of social and political forces. On average, above 60 per cent of the Latin American population live in poverty, of which more than half live in extreme poverty.<sup>2</sup> But poverty is the other face of the enrichment of the powerful capitalist minorities in each country: the concentration of income has been a process maintained during last the two decades. In 1999, according to official figures, 40 per cent of the poorest population across the region shared just 15 percent of total national income, whereas 40 per cent of total national income was concentrated in the hands of the richest 10 per cent of the population.<sup>3</sup> To these figures it is necessary to add the resources that Latin America transferred to the capitalist centres of the first world: between 1992 and 2001, more than 1.2 trillion dollars left Latin America in the service of external debt.<sup>4</sup> In spite of these transfers, the region's external debt doubled in the same period. In 2001, for each dollar the region received from the rich countries for 'poverty reduction', Latin America gave back more than 6 dollars. This was paid by the poor as the rich do not pay taxes.<sup>5</sup>

The worst of this internal and external pillage happened despite the left having significant parliamentary representation in several countries and even governing several national and state capitals as well as many municipalities. The fact is that in the decade in which the left has expanded its access to government, the economic and social situation of most of the population has worsened despite the significant efforts of progressive governments to improve citizens' quality of life. These are the hard facts to consider in evaluating the current political power of the left and the power that needs to be generated in order to overcome the exploitation of the popular majorities that the left seeks to represent politically, beyond the votes already won. Until recently the left governed in municipalities with limited economic jurisdiction, but this is true even for national governments, which are at the mercy of the vagaries of local and international capital. The case of Venezuela is illustrative of the classic theoretical problem on the differences that exist between *government* and *state*, on one hand, and between *state* and *power* on the other hand.

This lacerating reality to be transformed gives a measure of the challenges and responsibilities faced by the Latin American left today. This is not always clear in most analyses by the left itself, usually self-referential. Quite often, the left evaluates its success in relation to its previous situation. Any success is positive, and implies enormous efforts and sacrifices to be valued. If perfor-

mance is not measured in relation to the changes necessary, however, this can result in the elusion of responsibilities, and a failure to construct a strategy for change and to put in place the tools and political conditions required to move forward. The end result may be frustration and failure to make any difference.

These risks are always multiplied by the fact that the left does not act alone. It has to contend with a Latin American right that has demonstrated great capacity for political and ideological initiative in the face of crisis. The right has demonstrated efficiency in making the theoretical and political weaknesses of the left – indeed, even some of the successes – functional to its objectives. A key condition for mastery in politics is to understand that it is a relational process, in which each social and political actor is configured not only by what they aspire to be, but by what they are conditioned to be or do by others.

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In Latin America, this contradictory relation is deeply asymmetric, considering that the right sustains its power through the control of economic and social processes and the means of producing culture and values, as well as by conserving the legal monopoly on the use of coercive force beyond and even against governments. The outbreak of the internal contradictions generated by capitalism, however, is eroding its political influence and the effectiveness of the ‘great neo-liberal truths’ whereupon it has previously justified its dominion. This is a signal of the new conjuncture, but it hits the left too as the social crisis speeds ahead of the process of maturation of left political actors, imposing on them these new exigencies and rhythms emerging from the popular sectors. To put it more colloquially, the challenges to the left come from both ‘above’ and ‘below’. They limit the time available and shape the conditions for confronting the unresolved problems stemming from the political defeats imposed by earlier dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, as well as the ideological impact of the crisis of so-called ‘really existing socialism’, all of which are still insufficiently processed.

A peculiar characteristic of the present conjuncture is that the social and political crises are evolving relatively independently of the political actors. There are social struggles underway that are not tied to political parties and that sometimes go against party decisions. Several parties that mainly orient their actions to electoral politics are surpassed by the struggles of the masses. There is no shortage of parties trying to contain them or lead them in accordance with their own electoral objectives or timing, which results in disagreements and even ruptures in the relationships with social activists. In any event, such social struggles create new political scenarios to which left political parties must respond. The challenge is how to contribute to increasing the levels of mobilisation and how to prevent the political crisis being manipulated by the right.

The current social and political crises open numerous possibilities of change for those who oppose neoliberalism, but they also trigger multiple conservative responses from the right in order to impede or prevent any possible weakening of domination. If the left is not capable of advancing popular political power, it will be the right that determines the course of crisis to its own benefit.

The Latin American left today is seemingly much stronger than it was half a decade ago, but not yet strong enough for the challenges that lie ahead. This could mean reversions. It can be argued that, on the whole, the left's experiences of government across the region show mostly positive results: full of creativity, responsive to the needs of the grassroots, offering greater transparency and subject to the permanent scrutiny of society, forced to give results, and aimed at the gestation of a 'governing citizenship'. For many parties, the experiences in government represent the richest aspect of their political practices. Yet these experiences have not always contributed (nor to the same degree) to generating an enduring political force, and they also run the danger of becoming routinised, if splendid, administrations that could exhaust themselves as truly *alternative* projects.

There are experiences of municipal governance in the region that, by virtue of their permanence – more than a decade in Uruguay and Brazil and six years in Mexico and El Salvador – are able consistently to reflect on the capacity of the left to manage government. The mostly positive balance goes someway to explaining why public confidence in the left's capacity and a readiness to consider left governance at the national level have grown. There are plenty of analyses showing how these experiences have contributed to democratic reform of the state. They indicate a new relation between governed and governors through the development of a *governing citizenship*; a new concept of efficiency associated with the social effectiveness of public policies; a practice of transparency that implies real social control over public management and breaks with the deceptive transparency preached by the neo-liberal right, which is limited to statistics that, with luck, only the anointed ones (the famous *experts*) manage to decipher. Yet many of these studies only see issues of 'good government,' issues that could be analysed in similar ways for any government regardless of its political sign. A government of the left, however, necessarily implies a different conception of society and different strategies for using these parcels of power. Thus it is necessary to consider not only administrative aspects, but also their relation with the left's political project. The depoliticisation of most analyses is not casual, and it explains why these alternative experiences are insufficiently valued and have little space in the public administration curricula of the region's universities, where the ideological hegemony of the right still prevails.

## PECULIARITIES OF THE POLITICAL CONTEXT IN WHICH THE LEFT OPERATES

In spite of the aforementioned heterogeneity of left organisations, the context in which progressive parties develop their political activity is highly homogeneous, conditioned by the imposition of a conservative model of liberal democracy, which followed the transitions from dictatorial or authoritarian regimes to representative regimes.<sup>6</sup> Most of the region's parties participated in the representative system for the first time under this conservative political model. This poses an additional problem for these parties as they try to define an independent political project that is able to constitute autonomous political subjects while simultaneously participating in the formal institutions of representative democracy.

It must be remembered that before the 1970s, the liberal form of democracy did not exist as a real

political modality in the region, except in the cases of Chile, Uruguay, and to a lesser extent Costa Rica. Until then, Latin American politics journeyed through authoritarian regimes – some of them of the corporatist type – or through structures of slightly modernised oligarchic domination, in which liberal ideals were frankly conservative. Those specifically non-liberal conditions meant that numerous sectors of the Latin American left developed their projects in political contexts where even ‘bourgeois democracy’ was lacking. This led the left to search for alternative forms of political action, like guerrilla movements (pre-dating, but mostly after the Cuban Revolution) and symbolic anti-establishment protests, as well as actions based on corporatist logic. Latin America’s dearth of political liberalism accounts for why the left did not develop a theory of political democracy as a specific scenario for class struggle – as a means for *change*. The left was working in a context where the dominant vision of democracy was as a means for *conservatism*, an instrument for the political administration of power relations such that the status quo was guaranteed.

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Towards the end of the 1980s, when most of the Latin American left experienced representative democracy, what they found was *governable democracy*: the most conservative realisation of liberal democracy in history. The model of limited elitist democracy as an instrument for the political administration of the status quo (Hayek, 1944) conceives democracy only as the method for the recruitment of elites and the formation of governments that will decide *by themselves* and *for themselves* in the name of society as a whole. The model presupposes ‘a basic structural consensus’ in society (Schumpeter, 1972). There being no discrepancies on economic affairs, these stand outside of the political debate between the elites, remaining exclusively in the sphere of the market. The political elites are barely differentiated, and debate takes place only on procedural issues (Sartori, 1988). Nevertheless, as Joseph Schumpeter himself warned in the mid-1940s, “*the democratic method never works in the most favourable way when nations are very divided by the fundamental problems of the social structure*” (1972: 378).

It is this model, however, that prevails in Latin America. It removes economics from the political debate on the assumption that this is constituted as incontrovertible decisions taken by ‘the market’ or ‘globalisation’, conceived as metaphysical forces unrelated to power relations. Whether or not there is a ‘structural consensus’, the liberal right imposes as a *consensus* the belief that nobody can twist the destiny imposed by the market. In this way, the *self-fulfilling prophecy of globalisation* takes shape: the laws of the market cannot be opposed, society abdicates its decision-making capacities; *ergo*, the assaults of transnational capital, whether foreign or *criollo* in origin, are multiplied and society is rendered unable to stop them. Equilibrium is achieved by not tampering with the ‘consensus’. Any demand or conflict that goes against the will of capital is deemed a threat to democracy. The idea of *governability*, conceived as the search for political stability (read *obedience*), occupies the place of democracy. Democracy is no longer an institutional mechanism to process conflicts because these are considered *blockades* to democracy. In itself, democracy becomes ‘governable’.<sup>7</sup>

Under this political model, two functions are reserved for political parties: first, to serve as vehicles for the selection of the elites, through *elections*; second, to act as filters to prevent state policies coming into being that oppose capitalist objectives. Political parties are assigned the respon-



sibility of filtering the representation of subaltern interests, while ensuring that these are not organised such that they are expressed as demands.

These are the rules of the game the Latin American left must accept to be welcomed into the system as respectable partners. Means to ensure submission include blackmail and pressure, co-optation, and the internalisation of the liberal-conservative conceptualisation of politics. The left is conditioned to accept (by conviction or subordination) that politics consists of competing for consumers (voters) in a market and that, to win votes, political programmes must be indistinguishable and offered just like any other product for sale such that image is privileged over content. In Latin America, political marketing becomes a spectacle of the worst kind.

The model worked for one decade, enjoying a prolonged tolerance on the part of a society that, for the sake of conserving public liberties, was resigned to not 'endanger democracy' by making egalitarian demands. It also worked because this was a period of neo-liberal restructuring, during which society's capacity to demand was debilitated, despite the rise in unfulfilled necessities of life. The 'deregulation of labour', as it was euphemistically called, eliminated almost every legal protection previously granted workers. They were forced to accept wage reductions, the loss of union rights, job insecurity, and other forms of over-exploitation, in the hope they might keep a job that the very same economic model is set to destroy. Workers became organisationally dispersed as a new individualism was induced by the economy and cultivated through educational and cultural reforms. Poor people were pitted against each other in competing for the very scarce resources provided by the state in a targeted manner to a small number of specific groups. Social capacities to endure, resist, and demand disintegrated.

For one decade, capital had impunity in advancing its objectives. At the same time, however, the fact that the political model put no brakes on the worst excesses of this process seriously damaged the credibility of the representative system, resulting in the widespread loss of prestige of *los políticos* (politicians), *los partidos* (parties), and *la política* (politics); the rejection of political elitism and corruption; as well as the conviction that the representative institutions, particularly the parliament, are irrelevant to efforts to address the economic reality that affects the majority of the population.<sup>8</sup>

By the late 1990s, the crisis of the representative system had also extended to those parties of the left that had accepted the rules of the game of governability. The impact varied across countries, with the degree of acceptance of the rules of the game varying according to the depth of each party's social roots, because where such roots existed they forced parties towards greater independence. No party could avoid contamination by the system's practices entirely, however, which invariably led to strong criticism. This is a major reason for the rupture between some sectors of the left and left parties, sometimes even leading to a widespread rejection of 'politics' per se. This is a phenomenon of significant proportions because it involves a non-partisan left with substantial capacity for social mobilisation (Stolowicz, 2002).

One indicator of the rejection of this political model is electoral abstentionism: although the vote is obligatory in half the countries in the region, the abstention rate surpasses 50 percent on average. Judging by the active struggles taking place at the same time, political abstention cannot be interpreted as a sign of political apathy. Even the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB, 2000) recognises that 65 per cent of the Latin American population is currently unsatisfied with 'this' democracy.

Corroboration that this is fundamentally a rejection of the political model of governability is the fact that when credible political options for change appear in Latin America, there are renewed hopes and expectations that elections might install governments able to enact social change. Whenever the left has been able to offer credible alternatives, its electoral support has grown. The confidence obtained by certain presidential candidates, however, does not diminish the continued distrust towards the parties, which is why their showing in legislative races is often weaker.

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The crisis of representation that mainly affects right-wing parties, but which also contaminates those of the left, has caused the party system to lose effectiveness as a mechanism for social and political control and thus as an instrument of governability. When the representative system does regain credibility, it does so thanks to the left. For these two reasons, since the mid-1990s, the brightest right-wing politicians and intellectuals have been elaborating strategies to transfer from the party system to other state institutions those functions of social and political control which the party system can no longer perform effectively.

This is where the so-called *new institutionalism* comes in, which has been deceptively displayed by its promoters as the 'post-liberal consensus', succeeding the 'Washington Consensus'. The intention of the so-called 'second generation reforms' is to intensify the role of the state in 'completing' the neo-liberal restructuring process. This means more privatisation; labour laws that codify 'flexibilization'; the relinquishing of land, power resources, bio-diversity, and water to transnational capital (that is the real meaning of the Plan Puebla Panamá, Plan Colombia, the Andean Initiative and other 'megaprojects'); handing over direct military control in national territories to the United States and guaranteeing US economic dominion through the FTAA; the criminalisation of social protests; the 'judicialization' of politics to impede legislative opposition to the executive; and so on.

The justificatory discourse for these policies includes 'improving the rule of law' and 'institutional modernisation', but they are exclusively oriented to giving total security to capital in stormy weather. They are in fact neo-colonial policies, many of them entrenched through international treaties between formally sovereign states, which after normalisation as public international law are transformed automatically into national legislation and the contents of public policies. With the new century, these actions have been accelerated, according to the rhythm demanded by the capitalist crises, particularly that of the United States, and at precisely the time that popular resistance is on the rise. Thus the intensification of repression in the new conjuncture should come as no surprise.<sup>9</sup>

Masked by an apparent technical neutrality, these public policies continue to coopt academics and professionals, even as they allow the realization of neo-colonial strategies. The critique of neoliberalism has not reached the terrain of the ‘new public policies.’ Currently, the right defines the ‘agenda’ with little opposition. That is, it defines that which is *fundable* and thus *possible* for Latin American governments, including those of the left (which has been permeated by this discourse and by a number of these policies, involuntarily legitimating them often without realizing their implications).

The fact is that the parties on the left, in the representative system as well as in government administration, are under the pressure and influence of the strategies developed by the right to weaken the left’s potential as an alternative and convert the left into a force that merely administrates the existing system. The clarity required to perceive this strong ideological and political influence is not always forthcoming. Furthermore, international financial institutions impose this influence by pressing governments with external funding. Some governments on the left – but not all – have succeeded *in practice* in developing policies that neutralize the right’s objectives. Yet the challenge of independence in the face of transnational financial pressures will be still greater for the left’s national governments.

## THE DEBATE ON THE LOCAL

**T**he *local* has been the great ‘novelty’ of the 1990s, if not exactly a new subject. Traditionally, local governments have been spaces for the distribution of quotas of power within the dominant sectors: the ‘colourful’ realm of Latin American *caudillismo* and *caciquismo*. Since the early 1980s, the local has been one of the axes of the neo-liberal reforms of the state: governmental deconcentration allowed the central state to release social functions, to reduce its budget and its labour force. Under the new democracies, the local freed the representative system and the state from having to respond to unacceptable national demands. The sphere of the local is the preferred space for the new forms of political clientelism, the means through which central government implements focused social policies, low-cost mechanisms for social control that keep the poor unorganised and in constant competition among themselves, and overall, an effective mechanism of governability.

At the same time, the local has been one of the axes of the ideological justification for neo-liberal capitalist reconstruction, presenting it as the link that connects the market society with globalisation, a connection that the capitalist centres of ideological elaboration have dubbed the *global*. Several neo-liberal conceptualisations of contemporary society are synthesised in the construction of this term. They are all articulated in the ideologised affirmation of the irrelevance of the national state (which is necessary in order to justify the free circulation of transnational capital). Society is turned into a mirror of the market: individuals in competition, looking to compensate the loss of the national community in newly built small communities of voluntary allegiance, which tend to establish multiple relations among them in a reticular manner. In each one of these small communities, individuals make decisions on partial subjects, constituting a ‘polyarchy’ (Dahl, 1993)

in which power is dispersed (this justifies the privatisation of state functions, which are transferred to capital). For the liberal pluralist approach, the configuration of society and power in terms of class is no longer relevant; politics as the instance of decision-making at the national level disappears and is replanted in local particularisms. Collective social subjects correspondingly disappear.

This theorisation is aimed at justifying the social disintegration promoted by neo-liberal policies, and it is functional to the political model demanded by the neo-liberal notion of governability. It is used with normative intent, as promoting a desirable democracy: one that is distant from class-driven antagonisms; one unable to choose a national development model and concerned only with fine-tuning, without changing, the neoliberal model currently in place; and one which reduces 'the social' to small groups of reference.

Many intellectuals and politicians in the Latin American left are receptive to these arguments. In a certain way, they are used to accepting the defeat of social and political movements with resignation. Some take extreme positions, going so far as to see the local as the new historical formation of the social that is replacing antisystemic social movements (and they thus abandon the organization of such movements). There are those who take refuge in the local to distance themselves from the representative system they despise. Others, on the contrary, use the local space as the new platform for political careers within the same system. And there are many who glorify the micro-social – the substance of NGOs – because this is a means to obtain international financial support. In these local spaces, however, one also finds creative forms of popular and self-managed organisation against neo-liberalism and in search of alternatives for survival and solidarity. There is a mix of all this in the experiences of left-led local governments, although their specific weights change according to the nature of each project. There are differences between those political forces that assume the local as the substitute for collective social subjects, and those that conceive the local as an extension of their own reconstruction. The latter include efforts to reconstruct social tissue among some segments of the population. There are differences between social policies that are *asistencialistas* ("assistentialist," i.e., "band-aids" or ameliorative policies with no long-term or structural effects) and policies that promote stronger organisation of the social sectors involved in those policies. There are differences between projects that concentrate on the provision of basic urban services, and those that combine territorial and sectoral approaches because the latter projects enable a richer perspective on the social and economic order being challenged. There are also differences in conceptualisations of democratic participation at this level, insofar as the limits and characteristics of decision-making are concerned – deciding on short-term options for public works and services is not the same as deciding on broader and longer-term economic and social projects, as well as their direction and implementation. There are also differences between participation being limited to the ratification of government management – e.g., by means of telephone surveys – and the capacity to remove government officials. The richest experience to date has been the participatory budgeting project developed in Porto Alegre, which became a new paradigm for direct and democratic participation in local spaces throughout Latin America. Too often, however, participatory budgeting is considered with a procedural logic, rather than recognising its potential as a political project.<sup>10</sup>



All these options refer to differences between an approach aimed at creating new political conditions and those more self-limited approaches that seek to administer with efficiency and altruism the conditions that already exist. In Latin America, *good governance* has not been an exclusive asset of progressive forces in all times and places, but nowadays it is almost an exclusive virtue of the left. This is not the only characteristic defining an alternative project, however, and such a lack of content can lead to steps backward and the loss of the participatory impulse in government, which is in fact what has already happened in a number of countries. The good governments of the left are also appreciated by the new institutionalists of the right because they can contribute generic credibility to public policies, diminish the degree of dissatisfaction and conflict, and contribute to a reinforcement of systemic governability. These are some of the clues to understanding the different levels of tolerance on the part of the right to political co-habitation with left municipal and provincial governments, a cohabitation that is of course never free of the aggression, obstacles and disqualifications aimed at debilitating all progressive administrations.

Any tolerance disappears when the territory of government becomes a space for co-ordination and gestation of popular strategies, for the articulation of the struggles of *pobladores* (urban settlers), *campesinos* (peasants), trade unions, the unemployed, and students, as is happening in several Latin American countries where there is open resistance to national government policies of the right and the neo-colonial expropriation of natural resources. The territory of government as the scene for class struggles is a process in ascent in the region. The de-politicisation of the territory is the subject of the most forceful criticism from the left of conservative and liberal positions, which were hegemonic until a few years ago. This new scenario, of course, also challenges those left parties that subordinated their politics to the right's positions.

If the territory is not conceived as a space for social confrontation of the power of capital, a government of the left can end up distancing itself from those struggles, and be reduced to operating as a simple administrator of the existing order. There are experiences of this type which have resulted in a growing gap between the social movements and administrations they would have considered 'their' governments, as is currently visible in the evolution of Lucio Gutierrez's government in Ecuador, which has resulted in the quick frustration of the popular aspirations that gave Gutierrez the presidency. While left administrations should 'govern for everyone' (*gobernar para todos*), that is, provide services without exclusions, they cannot be socially neutral. The desire for good relations with big business and the media cannot allow left governments to stray from the path of attending first to the demands and needs of the popular classes, which form the majority in any case. Even if popular demands are expressed in politically primitive forms, due to desperation and lack of organization, overcoming this lack of political maturity is part of the left's challenge.

In this regard, it has not been easy for the left in government to build a new kind of relationship with trade unions and other popular organisations, not only those subordinated to the dominant classes and their parties, used as the vanguard against left governments, but also with independent and progressive unions. In such conflicts, governments are often in the right when they confront the deterioration of work ethics that are injurious even to the cause of the workers them-



selves. Left governments are expected to demand results from their workers, but also have to recognise that labour relations are being affected by the neo-liberal context. Then, of course, there is the age-old problem of social autonomy vis-à-vis any government, including those of the left. When independent forces do not exist to serve as catalysts for a radical political project, the logic of the administrator takes over and ends up exhausting the government. The challenge increases when national governments are won, as the Brazilian experience under Lula's government appears to suggest.

## GOVERNMENTS AND ELECTIONS

**B**eyond national and local differences, in all Latin American countries, governments of the left have produced good electoral results. In some cases, they counteract the effects of the crisis of representation on the parties themselves. To different degrees, we can observe a certain dualism in left parties, between one segment that works closely with the population and another that is engaged with or related to the systemic political elitism.

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This dualism operates with unequal but reciprocal influences. In general, the most positive aspects of the government experiences have had little impact on the conceptualisations and practices of the parties; there is little discussion as to their contributions to specific political projects of the parties. This situation could be affected by the fact that government officials themselves often seek to eliminate interference from parties for the sake of decisional efficiency. Governments do, however, tend to be influenced by the parties' most questionable practices, such as *electoralismo*,<sup>11</sup> since the very existence of the government project depends on continuity in office, which requires winning new elections. The political traditionalism that some left parties exhibit is expressed in government decisions on matters such as social alliances, in the determination of policies shaped by electoral moments, or in the handling of relations between government officials and other actors in the political system.

The impact of electoral politics is visible in all parties, certainly at election time. The long-term risks depend on endless possible circumstances, among them how parties are inserted into social organisations, which in turn define their own rhythm and exigencies in relation to parties. What is certain is that at election time positions tend to be more pragmatic and conditioned by the logic of political marketing. As the volume of votes grows, positions geared for elections often appear as the successful ones in the immediate future, even if they are eventually questioned in other political contexts.

Electoral success does not mean, however, that the volume of votes always grows. Elections can also be won through a high level of abstentionism. The momentary recovery of the credibility of the representative system does not compensate for the social dispersion and lack of organisation of those left behind, nor does it eliminate the social disenchantment resulting from a decade of political perversion. The fact is that votes are needed. On the premise that the ends justify the means, the missing votes are sought by means of making alliances with centre and right parties,

as happened in Brazil in the run-up to Lula's election as national president. The decision to catch votes 'from above' that traditionally belong to right or centre parties, rather than winning over politically the bits of the popular electorate moving away from right parties (a rather longer process), brings new contradictions for the left. These are not 'gratuitous deliveries of votes' on the part of the right; they imply future conditions for governments of the left.

In the short run, political decisions of this type seem innocuous when they offer electoral triumphs. Success is always both desirable and necessary, even with the aforementioned risks, because they will always represent a change in power relations and the possibility of being able to address some of the most acute social and economic needs. As limited as the reforms carried out might be, they require popular support and are praiseworthy in their own right. The extent and nature of the reforms, however, will be conditioned by the commitments made to non-progressive forces, beyond the votes won. In such foreseeable scenarios, the difference lies in the political force of the parties and the social capacity to defend popular victories. The Venezuelan example confirms this. The government and its social base were able to defeat two attempted *coup d'états*. The new experience of Brazil constitutes a true political laboratory with respect to much of what is argued here: A strong left, in a country with important urban and rural social movements, won government in alliance with the right and centre-right. In Ecuador, the triumph of Lucio Gutiérrez in the first round occurred as the result of an alliance with Pachakutik, which allowed him to obtain 20,43 percent of the total votes. In the second round, in November 2002, Gutiérrez won 54,79 percent with the support of other electorally weaker left parties and after making political agreements with the right and centre-right. A few weeks after taking office in January 2003, the Ecuadorian Co-ordinator of Social Movements threatened a rupture with the government over changes to economic and social policies and the government's explicit subordination to the United States.

Positive experiences of government administration do bring new votes. Yet if support for left administrations is not translated into processes of increasing popular organisation, raising consciousness, and developing more radical political projects, good administration is no guarantee of a captive electorate, as the Brazilian experience of Rio Grande do Sul showed when the PT was defeated in the most recent state election.<sup>12</sup>

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

**T**he problem of democracy, in all times and places, is that of human emancipation. The possibility that a society autonomously decides about its own present and future is associated with the conquest of social equality. A society that is at the limits of survival and that lacks the economic, educational, and informational resources necessary to exercise its liberty is a society that cannot constitute itself with full citizenship.

In Latin America, the gestation of full citizenship necessarily implies the elimination of powerful contemporary sources of inequality, misery and marginalisation. Democratic struggle in the region is, by default, a struggle against 'actually existing capitalism': neo-liberalism. This is a pro-



longed and complex process, which requires the reconstruction of social subjects who have been dispersed and debilitated by capitalist domination. They have to be empowered as political actors capable of bringing to a halt dominant policies and reconstructing Latin American societies from below.

In this essay, I have proposed an approach to old and new problems that does not see reality solely in black and white. I have tried to make clear that I do not share the idea that “the worse it gets, the better.” In complex processes, delays do not invalidate successes, which are necessary. Nevertheless, after several years of continuous electoral growth of the left – so difficult to obtain, requiring the overcoming of social fears of a right bent on preventing this by any means, including violence – it is fair to put forward a question many Latin American activists are posing: “*ganar para que?*” (winning for what?). There have never been so many progressive parliamentarians and municipalities governed by the left as in these years, that also have been among the most tragic for Latin American societies. Even with left governments, frustration has grown, particularly among the youth. Yet for all their shortcomings, left governments are commendable in the region; one cannot but be impressed by the characteristic absence of corruption, bureaucratic abuse, and repression, and by the improvements in the streets, plazas, and cultural spaces. This is all highly appreciated for the development of human dignity, but it has less value to those barely able to survive, and, for social majorities in Latin America, this is not a metaphor.

It is often argued – correctly – that progressive governments cannot magically solve serious structural problems with a single act. Nonetheless, any gradualism with which these governments operate should not be conceived as an *ideology of change*, but rather in terms of the construction of the political conditions necessary to effect radical transformation. Gradualist ideology is the shortest way to political defeat because it is based on the assumption – and this really is ‘magical’ – that changes can be effected without touching existing power structures. Even the noblest political co-habitation comes to an end as soon as capitalist privileges are even slightly threatened. The necessary political conditions can only be built by organised and mobilised societies. And conflicts with power-holders are inherent to walking “*without haste or pause*” (as the poet said). Governability is the affirmation of the status quo, and therefore cannot be an option for the left.

The challenges are enormous because capital currently has the most concentrated and mighty power it has had in history, and the right is not willing to accept any voluntary retreat. The contradictions that capital generates and has to face are serious, but they will not automatically lead to political defeats. For that reason, it is important to analyse the insufficiencies and errors of the left, which will become more and more significant as the left moves forward. This is not a paradox, but the dialectics inherent in emancipatory politics. Overcoming these shortcomings is a challenging and collective task, a task that is necessary to avoid complacency, but devoid of self-flagellation. Optimism is not misplaced in a Latin America whose social majorities are demanding changes loud and clear, and where there is a left that has problems to reflect on because it too is trying to walk the path of change.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion of these experiences is available in the book that I edited five years ago (Stolowicz, 1999). The book was authored by a collective of Latin American researchers that included Hugo Zemelman (Chile), José Eduardo Utzig (Brazil), Alvaro Portillo (Uruguay), Margarita López Maya (Venezuela), Nidia Díaz (El Salvador), Telésforo Nava y Emilio Pradilla (México) and Armando Fernández Soriano (Cuba).

<sup>2</sup> Institutions like the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) have established that 43 percent of the Latin American households were under the poverty line in the late 1990s. The corresponding figures for Mexico, according to Julio Boltvinik (2001a), a researcher from the Colegio de México, were 40 percent of the households and 74 percent of the individuals. According to the World Bank's definitions, 'poor' is any person with an income of less than two dollars per day, and 'extremely poor' are those with less than one dollar (World Bank, 1990; 2001).

<sup>3</sup> These data, published by CEPAL (2003), are expected to have worsened after the deep economic crises that exploded in 2001 and 2002 in Argentina, Uruguay, and other previously less affected countries.

<sup>4</sup> In 1992, the region's debt totalled 478.700 million dollars. After the payment of a large amount as capital and interest, the debt increased to 817.200 million in 2001. In total amount, Latin America has already transferred four times the resources originally received, which is equivalent to the resources needed to cover the 'basic needs' of the region's population during 17,5 years, according to the calculation of the cost of those needs made by the World Bank (2003; see also Fernández-Vega, 2003: 24).

<sup>5</sup> In Mexico, for instance, in 2001 the richest segment of the population (*decil X*) evaded taxation equivalent to 60 billion dollars. The stock market does not pay taxes, but private banks received 100 billion dollars after the state-isation of their debts (Boltvinik, 2001b: 38).

<sup>6</sup> The Bolivarian political project in Venezuela was carried out as a rupture with such a model of democracy.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the problems of 'governable democracy' see Stolowicz (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Only in Uruguay, in 1992, privatisation was stopped using institutional political, when the majority of the population rejected a law that enabled the transfer of state-owned enterprises to the private sector. In the rest of Latin America, only popular uprisings were able to restrain similar proposals, and only partially.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the new institutionalist strategies, discourses, and policies, see Stolowicz (2003).

<sup>10</sup> This formalistic approach does not sufficiently consider the relationship between local direct democracy and representative democracy, or the role of political parties. Or it extrapolates procedural schemes without considering their applicability according to the size of municipalities and cities and other multiple variables.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to using political marketing strategies, many parties transform their leadership styles and organizational structures in accordance with electoral practices (for example, organizing by electoral districts rather than by social sectors).

<sup>12</sup> In Brazil, in the first round of the elections of October 2002, Luiz Inácio *Lula* da Silva obtained 46,44 percent of the national votes. The PT obtained 18,38 percent of the total votes for deputies and 18,52 of the total votes for senators. In Rio Grande do Sul, the PT lost the government of the state. In the first round, the former Petista mayor of Porto Alegre Tarso Genro obtained 37,25 percent of the votes, earning the embarrassing distinction as the candidate for governor from an incumbent party with the smallest percentage of votes in all the country. In the second round Genro collected 47,33 percent of the votes against the winning coalition of right and centre-right parties.

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## THE NEW POLITICS PROJECT: THE CONTEXT AND THE NEED

It is risky to make global generalisations. The ones we are about to make should be read therefore with all the qualifications which flow from the uneven nature of historical development.

We are working for social justice at a time when it has become clear that the traditional political parties of the left – whether social democratic or various forms of Leninist - have failed to bring about or to sustain the changes they were founded to achieve. Yet at the same time the popular impetus and desire for social justice has not diminished. Indeed, the past thirty years has seen a radical widening and deepening of people's expectations for social justice, to include problems of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and the environment. And the last five years has seen the growth on an unprecedented scale of movements for social justice that are simultaneously locally rooted and globally connected.

The result across the world is a unique gulf between the strength and depth of popular discontent and its ability to affect political power. This had disastrous consequences: most recently in enabling Bush and Blair to go to war. If the popular majority against the invasion of Iraq in the UK, Spain and Italy had been translated into political power, the US invasion would not have had the legitimacy it needed to enable Bush to gain public support. History might have been different. Many other examples could be given to illustrate the way that the rich and powerful get away with murder because those campaigning for social justice lack adequate means of political expression. However even without direct representation within the political system, popular movements have managed to halt corporate globalisation in its tracks. The blocking of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and the collapse of the Cancun Assembly of the WTO are prime examples. These precarious and defensive victories were also the result of contradictions between governments but it was only the pressure, initiative and moral legitimacy of the movements which stretched these contradictions to breaking point.

Adequate political tools are not there, ready made, waiting to be discovered. Neither are they being forged somewhere beyond the struggles of movement activists. Yet there is growing recognition of the need for new forms of political agency. Many movement activists are dissatisfied with the partial victories that social movement pressure can bring, without direct political follow through. A unique process of political rethinking, experimentation and invention is taking place globally. It is a search for ways of gaining and using political power to end the misery of inequality, injustice and war. In some countries, activists from traditional left organisations are coming together with activists from social movements to create new political parties that are winning elections and using electoral institutions both to press for immediate change and to further widen the appeal and strength of radical social movements. In other countries, particularly in Latin America, parties which sprang from an earlier phase of rethinking and innovation have gained or are near to gaining political office and are struggling to create new participatory forms of democracy in an effort to achieve social justice where exclusively electoral democracy has failed. And there are countries such as England, the US and South Africa where a single party, for very different historical reasons, has a monopoly on left political representation and has acquiesced in varying degrees to neo-liberal economics and US political hegemony, leaving vast swathes of progressive people disenfranchised. In those countries, the left struggles to build an independent base of popular support without in the short or medium term having a direct means of political expression.

There are many things to be done in this situation. But one pressing task which an international fellowship of committed researchers and writers like the TNI can take on is the international cross fertilisation and reflection on these diverse and yet related experiences. In a situation where no inherited orthodoxy provides adequate tools of strategic analysis, the only way to develop these tools is through interrogating, comparing, reflecting on the trials, errors and achievements of practice. This requires a systematic, organised international process; a process which is a resource for national and local activists and is organised in conjunction with them.

The TNI's New Politics Project aims to be such a *resource* for the global rethinking of the left. Our resources and capabilities are limited. Our ability to carry out this project in a truly useful way therefore depends on the interest, commitment and inputs of a wide range of thinkers and activists from around the world.



Latin America has entered a new political conjuncture. The electoral force of the left is a relevant indicator of the new political moment, but it is neither sufficient as an expression nor as an explanation for that moment. It could even lead to mistaken conclusions, such as the supposition that the electoral force of the left in itself means an absolute decline of conservative forces in the region. While such signs of the advance of popular forces justly inspire hope and enthusiasm, this should not obscure the complexity of Latin America's political processes.

At this new conjuncture, the electoral rise of the left expresses a new social and political reality, defined fundamentally by the ascent of popular struggles and the endurance of resistance to neo-liberalism. Sometimes, this new reality is manifest in popular uprisings able to stop privatisations, reverse unpopular policies and bring down presidents. In some cases, such struggles have been the immediate precursors to electoral success. This ample and diverse panorama of struggles does not always correlate with elections, however, and the actors are not necessarily tied to the left parties that participate in electoral processes.

The Latin American left today is seemingly much stronger than it was half a decade ago, but not yet strong enough for the challenges that lie ahead. This could mean reversions. It can be argued that, on the whole, the left's experiences of government across the region show mostly positive results: full of creativity, responsive to the needs of the grassroots, offering greater transparency and subject to the permanent scrutiny of society, forced to give results, and aimed at the gestation of a 'governing citizenship'. For many parties, the experiences in government represent the richest aspect of their political practices. Yet these experiences have not always contributed (nor to the same degree) to generating an enduring political force, and they also run the danger of becoming routinised, if splendid, administrations that could exhaust themselves as truly *alternative* projects.

Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activist-scholars committed to critical analyses of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to those movements concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable direction.

The TNI New Politics Project aims at stimulating innovative thinking on questions of participatory democracy and progressive governance, and the identities and roles of social movements, civic coalitions and political parties operating from local to global levels in forging new democratic politics and policies. The project intends to develop an alternative political vision to that offered by mainstream political and development theories, while drawing lessons from and attempting to go beyond traditional social democratic and left models.

The project's distinctive starting point is a belief that, at this time of history, the vital innovations lie in practical experiments and experience. In a situation where no inherited orthodoxy provides adequate tools of strategic analysis, the only way to develop these tools is through interrogating, comparing and reflecting on the trials, errors and achievements of experience. This requires a systematic and international process. The programme hopes to stimulate such a process and in so doing to develop a truly global fellowship of committed and creative thinkers and activists.

The project supports writing from the front line of political innovation and arranges for these to be translated and published in a wide range of publications and through the Internet. It also organises seminars and workshops, and collaborates with other research centres, universities and civic organisations engaged in similar initiatives across the world.

