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Latin America

Thinking about the (new) paths of the Latin American left and right in a world in crisis

- Features -

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We are publishing the foreword written by Franck Gaudichaud and Éric Toussaint at the request of the Cuban magazine Temas for a book coordinated by Julio César Guanche, to be published in Argentina under the title *Izquierdas y derechas en America latina*.

The world in recent years has been crossed by multiple crises. We could speak of a global, intersectional and interconnected “poly-crisis” of neoliberal capitalism: profound political shifts and economic turbulence, wars and armed violence, accelerated collapse of ecosystems and the climate, pandemics and predatory extractivism, abrupt redefinitions of geopolitical balances and inter-imperialist tensions, etc. Once again, humanity is facing massive turbulence and major challenges at a historic moment where, clearly, its very survival as a species is at stake, as is its (in)ability to collectively and peacefully inhabit this planet. The great German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg said in the 1910s, at midnight in the last century: socialism or barbarism! This slogan resonates strongly today, [1] in a context where peoples and popular movements continue to resist, mobilise, debate, propose, but without managing to escape levels of structural fragmentation; nor are there any glimpses - for the moment - of emancipatory political forces with real capacity to accompany and consolidate these resistances and co-construct a medium-term course for “root” democratic and eco-social alternatives (following the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda).

However, if we look at the “Latin” Americas and the Caribbean of the last two decades, the lands of Berta Cáceres, José Carlos Mariátegui and Marielle Franco seem to be seeking new social and political paths, awakening hopes in the left on a global scale, beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall and a voracious neoliberalism. “Left turn,” “progressive wave,” “end of neoliberalism,” “pink tide”: the sociopolitical inflection experienced by many countries in South and Central America in the 2000s surprised many observers and even fascinated many others, particularly in Europe. [2] The challenge – particularly for countries such as Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador that had constructed a “transformative” narrative and promise – was to find political-electoral and national-popular paths in a “post-neoliberal” and anti-imperialist framework. For some activists and movements, it was not only a matter of “democratising democracy”, but also of not remaining locked into a new model based on the extractivism of “commodities”, on subjection to the world market and to various forms of internal and external colonialism. More than 20 years after the beginning of this “cycle”, we can see to what extent this transformative objective has not been achieved, although at very different rates and realities depending on the regional scenarios and national realities of Abya Yala or indigenous consciousness. [3] Obstacles and difficulties, disenchantment and disappointments have spread in several countries governed by the left and by “progressivism”, without any homogeneous dynamic being detected. In parallel, conservative forces and the new far-right have been able to capitalise on this context of multiple crises, imposing new political and cultural narratives that are furiously “anti-progressive”, supported by large media corporations and local and imperial economic oligarchies, in order to, ultimately, emerge as “popular alternatives”: Javier Milei is the latest link in this reactionary global chain. [4] And Nayib Bukele Ortez, re-elected as president of El Salvador in February 2024, has developed a style of government reminiscent of the experience of Rodrigo Duterte’s presidency in the Philippines between 2016 and 2022, during which thousands of extrajudicial executions against “lumpenised” popular sectors were carried out by the repressive forces under his control in the name of the fight against drug trafficking. Daniel Noboa, elected president of Ecuador in 2023, could try to move in this direction.

As reflected in this work, it is essential to establish a critical and reasoned balance sheet of the last decades from the social sciences and with their methodology, delving into and debating essays and publications that are trying to decipher the Latin America of today. It is about analysing in its shifting complexity the period that began in the 2000s (with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1999), the product of social and plebeian struggles against the neoliberal hegemony of the previous period. An initial leap followed by a multiplicity of electoral victories allowing a relative “golden age” (between 2005 and 2011) of the left and progressive governments, with various forms of a compensatory and redistributive State, a notable decrease in poverty and new forms of political participation. This period was followed by a clear regional reflux, a fall in the price of raw materials and a conservative rebound

(2011-2018), marked by - among others - the deep crisis of the “Bolivarian revolution”, thus reaching the chaotic post-pandemic moment of recent years (2019-2023), where we witnessed the victory of Bolsonaro in Brazil, the confirmation of the right-wing dynamics in Ecuador, but also popular uprisings in Chile, Haiti, Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. At the same time, a third, clearly limited (compared to the beginning of the century) new “wave” of institutional leftism (or “late progressivism” according to Massimo Modonesi) began to take shape in Chile with the election of Gabriel Boric (2021), in Colombia with the victory of Gustavo Petro (2022), in Honduras with the presidency of Xiomara Castro (2022), in Guatemala with the election of Bernardo Arévalo in 2023 but also - since 2018 - with the election of Manuel López Obrador in Mexico or in 2020 with the democratic return of the Movimiento al socialismo (MAS or Movement towards Socialism in Bolivia).

Understanding these processes from various points of view, geographies and sensibilities is precisely what this collective book, coordinated by researcher Julio César Guanche and published by the Cuban magazine Temas, invites us to do. The main interest of this publication is to cover the political and social realities of several countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Cuba, from a critical examination of the continuities and new phenomena in the region, especially the underground social and cultural transformations that run through the ongoing political changes. This multi-authored book deals with left-wing or “progressive” processes in power, as well as conservative and reactionary ones. It describes the plebeian dimensions of populism or the extreme right (in Ecuador, Brazil and Peru), and deciphers the contradictions of progressivism in power. And if the authors gathered here consider the partisan and institutional aspects (for example, with regard to the Ecuadorian right or the Chilean and Mexican left), it is not by leaving aside the broad field of collective mobilisations and organised civil society: Afro-descendant social movements, feminist and anti-feminist struggles, fundamentalist religious impulses, indigenous movements – these are all present in this opus. Undoubtedly, the diversity of approaches and origins of the researchers invited here, all with a long history of work and life in different countries of the region, allows us to offer the reader an interesting, plural and contrasting view of the continent at the present time.

Political scientist Norberto Bobbio, in his classic book *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, convincingly underlined that distinguishing the two poles of this binomial can be a good starting point for thinking about a political map. [5] In this distinction, Bobbio starts from the freedom/equality axis to classify political forces: the right claims in a privileged manner the concept of “freedom” (of the market and/or individual in particular) and the left claims that of “equality” (and of social and collective emancipation). Bringing this reflection to bear on Latin America and the Caribbean, and breaking with Eurocentric visions, it would be necessary to introduce a set of other concepts to flesh out this distinction, such as the colonality of power and the national/plurinational conceptions of the State, the notions of popular sovereignty and anti-imperialism, the rights of indigenous peoples and racial or gender social relations, development and socio-environmental models, etc. Beyond these characterisations, it is above all the grey areas and recesses of current Latin American sociopolitical spaces that this book confirms, spaces that cannot be summarised in a simple Left/Right dichotomy.

This publication offers us updated versions of texts present in a dossier of the magazine Temas from 2022. In their presentation, the coordinators rightly note: “The arrival of new left-wing and centre-left governments, identified as the “pink tide” in Latin America and the Caribbean, barely refers to an electoral phenomenon, whose political environment is more complex. Within them, there are strategic differences, intersections of social bases between left-wing and conservative zones, such as neo-evangelism, rejection of the authoritarianism of some progressive movements, criticism of the gender issue, racial and environmental justice, the demands of indigenous peoples, and other topics on the political agenda, such as the energy transition, the perpetuation of extractivism and its correlation with a system of popular democracy, whether called socialism or not. Although they have lost seats in government, the conservative currents have gained a popular base, as reflected not only by their parliamentary representation, but also by the strengthening of neoliberal consensus among these other bases, about “freedom” and “democracy” and against “populism”. These currents have not stopped using repression to maintain a regime of inequality characterised by its great social devastation”. [6]

More than ever, Latin American realities show the turbulence of societies and all political forces: a situation where “libertarian” and “anarcho-capitalist” extreme right-wing movements can sweep the precarious popular sectors electorally, while at the same time political currents emerging from the depths of the left embody authoritarian practices or practices disconnected from social, feminist or ecological movements. This is what several chapters of the book confirm and what Daniel Kersfeld underlines, recalling that progressivism has been marked in recent years by various forms of caudillismo, corruption, acceptance of an extractivist development model or that they implemented “hard-line” and militarisation policies, which until recently seemed to be the “political heritage” of the right. In another chapter, the anti-racist feminist researcher and activist Alina Herrera Fuentes, highlights that patriarchal conservatism does not only come from the ranks of the right: “The national paths of the progressives were and are deeply fragile and discontinuous. During some periods and on certain issues, progress was made that was then halted at other times. For example, while the overall poverty rate decreased, the feminisation of poverty increased during that period. In other words, there was an overall decrease in poverty, but women benefited less than men from the policies that ensured that fact (United Nations, Women 2017). But above all, it was policies that challenge traditional norms of family and sexuality—such as abortion, same-sex marriage, recognition of gender identity, and in some cases gender-based violence—that were most hampered by the conservatism of leaders or by alliances between politicians in power and expanding religious neoconservatism. The evidence in this regard overturns the assumption that, by definition, left-wing politics questions conservative beliefs and hierarchies, with an implicit or explicit religious basis.”

These findings do not, of course, erase the positive balance of the years 2000-2010 in terms of the fight against poverty, the progress of public policies in education, health and housing construction, the achievement of original constituent processes (Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela), the Bolivarian drive for regional integration independent of the United States (UNASUR, CELAC, ALBA), the development of a new South-South diplomacy, thanks in particular to Hugo Chávez, who tried to promote an anti-imperialist left-wing axis, and to a certain extent to Lula, who preferred to increase his country's influence in the region and the BRICS axis. Regarding the international policies of Lula and Dilma Rousseff, it would be useful to take into account and update the analysis made by the Brazilian Marxist author Ruy Mauro Marini in the 1960s, when he characterised Brazil as “sub-imperialist.” As Claudio Katz notes: “Ruy Mauro Marini did not limit himself to revisiting old accusations about the oppressive role of the United States. Instead, he introduced the controversial concept of “sub-imperialism” to portray the new strategy of the Brazilian ruling class. He described the expansionist tendencies of large companies affected by the narrowness of the internal market and perceived their promotion of aggressive state policies to penetrate neighbouring economies.” [7] While Hugo Chávez actively supported the ALBA project with Cuba, with the support of Bolivia and Ecuador in particular, and laid the foundations for a Bank of the South, Lula gave priority to strengthening Brazil's regional and international role as a regional power, coordinating the military intervention in Haiti (which suited Washington very well) and actively participating in the launch of the BRICS in 2009 with Russia, China and India (to which South Africa was added in 2011). Hugo Chávez needed the protection of Lula's Brazil from the danger posed by Washington, and had high hopes for its support for the creation of the Bank of the South. Although the Bank's Founding Act was signed in Buenos Aires - in December 2008 - by Brazilian President Lula, Argentine President Néstor Kirchner, Bolivian President Evo Morales, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, Uruguayan President Tabaré Vázquez and Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, Brazil effectively paralysed the Bank's launch. [8] The Bank of the South has never functioned [9] and no credit has been granted in the fifteen years since its creation. In fact, Lula favoured the use of the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES) for credit policy in the region. This bank provides loans to large Brazilian companies such as Odebrecht, Vale do Rio Doce, Petrobras, etc so that they can expand and strengthen their activities abroad.

Lula subsequently supported the launch of the activities of the New Development Bank created by the BRICS, based in Shanghai and chaired by Dilma Rousseff from 2023. [10] Lula also favoured Mercosur, which corresponded to the interests of big Brazilian capital. The abortion of the Bank of the South must be included in the critical evaluation of the first wave of progressivism. Along with this came the relative isolation of Ecuador in 2007-2009 with its decision to audit its debt and suspend payment of a large part of the same after declaring it illegitimate. Ecuador won a resounding victory over its private creditors, but its example was not followed by other countries in the region, despite

the promises made at the meeting of heads of state of the region held in Venezuela in July 2008, and contrary to the desire of President Fernando Lugo (Paraguay) to follow the Ecuadorian example. [11]

Thus, when taking stock, we see all the nuances, setbacks and limits of this initial cycle, dependent on fragile and transitory balances, which left space for a recomposition of the right and even fascist figures (Bolsonaro, Kast, Milei, Añez, Bukele, etc.). In fact, if this book speaks of “lefts and rights” in the plural, it also investigates the very notion of “progressivism.” Such a characterisation is present in almost all the chapters, but what does Latin American progressivism mean today? Does it speak to us about the crisis of the Bolivarian process in Venezuela, the timid reforms of the young president Boric in Chile, the “left-wing populism” of AMLO? This word is par excellence conceptually vast and ambiguous, becoming an elusive and at the same time omnipresent word. In fact, it is interesting to remember that, “This notion of progressivism belongs to the language by which the Marxist left has historically designated the social democratic, populist or national-popular social and political programmes and forces that sought to transform and reform capitalism by introducing doses of state intervention and regulation and wealth redistribution: in the Latin American case, with a clear anti-imperialist and developmentalist accent. This last aspect, now presented as ‘neo-developmentalism’, is connected to the notion of progress and contributes to defining the horizon and character of the project, as well as the criticisms that, from environmentalist, eco-socialist or post-colonial perspectives, frontally question the idea of progress and development both in its expressions of past centuries and in its extension into the 21st century.” [12]

We believe that this book shows that one can also find ambiguities and vanishing points when thinking about a definition of the right of the present time, conservatism or even the new extreme right. However, what is highlighted by the cases of Ecuador analysed by Franklin Ramírez Gallegos, of Brazil presented by Luiz Bernardo Pericás or of Peru (article by Damian A. Gonzales Escudero) is that a common basis for the consolidation and radicalisation of the current right is the frontal confrontation with progressivism, whether in its national-popular or centre-left aspects. This is what is confirmed in a country that is today the main stage of continental reaction: Argentina, where the construction of Milei's 'outsider' candidacy was based on the hatred of a part of the electorate towards Peronism and Kirchnerism, in a context of economic collapse, hyperinflation and rejection of the management of Alberto Fernández, who did not keep his promises to denounce the illegitimate and odious debt contracted by Mauricio Macri with the IMF in 2018. Another country that would be interesting to include in the reflections is Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua, as it offers the dramatic example of a country governed by a political force that initially emerged from a revolution (1979-1989) and which today embodies the tutelage of a repressive family clan, which wanting to implement an IMF programme in 2018, provoked a massive rebellion of youth and other popular sectors and decided to brutally repress it to stay in power. [13]

And here it is necessary to recognise another original aspect of this book: it includes a reflection on the situation in Cuba, a necessary critical reflection when Cuba and its revolution have been a central “beacon” of the imagination of the Latin American and world left throughout the 20th century. [14] Manuel R. Gómez reviews the history of the Cuban right wing as a “useful instrument” – but not a determining one – of the state and imperial policy of the United States, both during the periods of Washington's “hard line” towards the Caribbean island, and of relative and timid rapprochement during the Obama administration. As for Wilder Pérez Varona, he rightly asks: In what sense can we speak of left and right in Cuba today, knowing the specificities of Cuban history since 1959 and its sociopolitical regime? There, the very term “revolution” became unclear, since “for decades, the term revolutionary has combined very diverse relationships. Very early on, in specific circumstances, all opposition was expelled from the national political community, and branded as counterrevolutionary. The term “revolution” has been used to summarise an exceptional epic, whose achievements and scope have resisted systematic US belligerence. Its use has often avoided the analysis of the contradictions of the process as well as of its actors. The premise of unity in the face of siege externalised the political conflict.” To speak in terms of left/right in Cuba today actually points to an essential question: that of political representation, or rather, its deficit, in the context of an increasingly unequal and differentiated society, of the expansion of dissent and of growing demands for changes on the economic and cultural level, but also for real political democratisation.

To conclude this brief presentation, let us return to our initial observation: the global “poly-crisis” and the observation that we are entering a period of strong turbulence that is being felt throughout the continent. Thus, as Gabriel Vommaro and Gabriel Kessler affirm, today “Ideological polarisation with emotional components, widespread discontent and polarisation around an emerging leader are marking Latin American politics, whose electorates, as in other latitudes, are showing themselves to be increasingly volatile and dissatisfied” [15] Perhaps we have here an essential lesson that this collective book leaves us with and the urgency it represents. Beyond political regimes, right and left, progressivism or conservatism, citizen unrest and the discontent of those “below” is increasing. But there is also hopelessness if local and global democratic alternatives do not emerge, a hopelessness that could open the door to increasingly violent and reactionary forces, and even to the possibility of fascism. [16]

Analysing this acute moment we are experiencing from within the eye of the storm, better understanding the present and outlining future prospects for Latin America and the Caribbean is precisely what the authors of this book contribute to.

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Translated by David Fagan for International Viewpoint.

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