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Latin America

# From the crisis of progressivism to the progress of the crisis

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**In recent years, debates in the international Left on Latin America have tended to focus on countries with governments that, in different ways and at different tempos, separated themselves somewhat from their nations' traditional oligarchies (sometimes more discursively than really): Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador. In general, without downplaying their political and economic importance, but as the situation dictated, the emphasis has been on Venezuela, Brazil, or Argentina. Even Ecuador seemed to be an add-on to the "progressive axis" in international analyses. Then we saw, one-by-one, the progressive experiments fall, wear out, and enter into crisis. Debates revolved around the "end of the cycle" and the menacing Right coming for revenge. There were urgent calls to stop the enemy, and for unity.**

Unity on what? Why? With whom? Principal enemies and lesser enemies? With the passing of months, the situation became far more complex. It is marked by at least three elements:

(1) a blossoming of popular, massive resistance, events, and the strength of the people,

(2) an extreme Right that goes from being a ghost to a terrifying reality, and

(3) a major problem of perspectives. "We do not want this!" the people shout. So... What do we want? And more importantly, how do we get where we want to go?

## The news in brief:

**Nicaragua:** In the last few years, the Ortega-Murillo government has been deepening its complete (in case there was still any doubt) betrayal of Sandinismo itself. It has allied with the Right and the conservative churches. When it implemented a pension reform in 2018, it unleashed a popular, angry, directionless uprising. To this the Ortega-Murillo government responds with repression and imprisonment, of feminist militants, young activists, and old FSLN combatants.

**Puerto Rico:** In 2019 the big wave started with the hot summer in the Caribbean, with the leak of Telegram conversations where then-Governor Ricardo Rosselló openly mocked the people, the pain, and the sorrow of Hurricane María, which hit the island in 2017. (Let us remember the time when Trump threw toilet paper at the people. The island's colonial status meant that for months the island was without electricity, international aid could not arrive, and the government's disregard was such that the people had to bury their dead when they could, as they could.) A popular mobilization erupted that finally made Ricardo resign, after massive demonstrations even with figures like Ricky Martin, Bad Bunny, Residente, etc.—who, joking aside, give a sense of the social depth of the outburst, which, at its peak, had one-third of the census population in the streets. Ricky's fall meant, for the first time in a decade, A victory! (with twerking).

**Peru:** In October 2019, Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra dissolved Congress against the Fujimorista parliamentary majority, continuing a deep political crisis that has institutional governance itself in crisis. [Despite] mobilizations in December (at the 2017 Christmas dinner!), perhaps one feature here is the centrifugal crisis, where the level of mobilization now is not as strong a protagonist as that itself of the oligarchies in power.

**Ecuador:** A gasolinazo, like the one we lived through at the beginning of 2018 in Mexico, a decreed economic adjustment in which the State gave itself fully to the IMF, and which also affected pensions and debt, caused a social mobilization to erupt, with the indigenous peoples organized in the CONAIE as the main protagonists. It is important to pause here to mention a couple elements: (1) the central role of the indigenous peoples; (2) the crisis of the local expression of “progressivism,” where the movement was able to escape a certain “campism,” where “neither Lenin nor leash” had deep roots, beyond militant circles, without this meaning an alternative with aspirations for power; and (3) a VICTORY, the second of the year, with a pan flute. For years, important actors in the Ecuadorian popular movement had distanced themselves from Correa, and there are indications in the government of Lenín Moreno, beyond personalized struggles, of important continuities with Correa, and not only because Moreno was Correa’s candidate and vice president, so that the accusation of “betrayal” collapses under its own weight.

**Haiti:** Haiti is experiencing a popular uprising against the government of Jovenel Moïse with the exposure of the cynical corruption of the “Petrocaribe” agreement launched by Hugo Chávez in 2005, not to help rebuild Haiti (today 10 years after the earthquake that devastated it), but to build luxurious hotels, private beaches, and cruise ships. Meanwhile, the humanitarian emergency, now over a decade old, continues, with food lacking, shortages of basic supplies, curable diseases spreading, all in a nation that still bears the punishment of the world oligarchies for the slave rebellion that won its independence between 1791 and 1804. All this, while the world remains silent. [\[1\]](#)

**Chile:** From a regional point of view, the epicenter, or place where events and their outcomes while have the greatest impact on the entire continent, is Chile, together with Bolivia. The neoliberal bubble has popped (it has always been the Right’s counter-example against Venezuela). An increase in subway fares and the movement against it, initially led by “secondary-schoolers” (high-schoolers in the Mexican system), unleashed a massive, profound movement that puts at the center, among other elements: pensions (a system as fucked up as the Mexican one), access to education (you have to put yourself in infinite debt to access university), the shocking social inequality (as bad as Mexico!), political repression, and questioning Pinochet’s constitution, the agreed transition, and for various months now the streets of Chile are calling for change. This is overwhelming not only the oligarchy, but even several of the traditional structures of the social movement (the positions, for example, of the CUT and the Frente Amplio are, in my opinion, regrettable), and if Piñera has not fallen, it has also been due in part to the actions of some of these sectors. The depth of mobilization has even reached the football clubs animation groups, women, artists, a festival of people. A moment in which women are on the front line, organizing from feminist platforms, and where—not without contradictions—one can think about a good synergy between feminist spaces and other spaces of organization. An exceptional occurrence or, as the new hymn of the struggle in Chile says, The Dance of the Leftovers ...

**Argentina:** After the defeat of kichnerismo in 2015, Macri now has faced his electoral defeat. “Local progressivism” is back, kichnerismo is achieving victory by default—apparently more because of the implosion of the others than because of its own strength—in the midst of widespread impoverishment.

**Brazil:** In Brazil, Bolsonaro’s legitimacy is eroding while the global climate balance is being played out in small ways in the Amazon tragedy. Lula manages to leave jail, reordering the debates and centers of gravity of the Brazilian Left. Marielle Franco, a fellow PSOL member, Rio city councilor, black woman, and lesbian from the favelas was murdered in March of 2018, as political repression for opposing the militarization of the favelas in Rio, where Bolsonaro and his henchmen are involved.

**Bolivia:** Just after seeing the Ecuadorian victory and the hopeful wave of popular rage in Chile, Bolivia confronts a coup d’état, in what could be a historic defeat of great significance, although it of course depends on the struggle. Although the Evo government itself was wearing down and had contradictions, and the complex scenario tacitly put sectors of the social movement alongside the coup d’état, this does not absolve the popular sectors for aligning themselves in act or omission with the coup. Meanwhile, Evo’s political error of not respecting the unfavorable result of the 2016 referendum (which no one obligated him to do) opened the door for the ultra-Right to claim fraud in the

last election and unleash the worst racist, ultra-conservative, reactionary forces that, through street and military violence, consummated the coup d'état. Today (December 2019) there is strong resistance to the coup, while the MAS tacitly accepts it, a forced acceptance, if you will, of its defeat.

**Colombia:** In mid-2019, Colombia puts Uribe himself on the bench right after sectors of the FARC (and consequently the AUC, which never left) return to arms as the murders of social leaders continue unabated. Partly as a result of accumulated popular rage, partly due to the echo of regional revolts, another “example” of the continental Right breaks stability when, on 21 November, a national strike is unleashed, but unlike the Ecuadorian or Chilean cases (where the uprisings were “unexpected”), in Colombia the 21 November strike follows months of preparation after having announced the date. The call exceeded expectations (which sought a traditional march) and put the people, too, at the center of the agenda, demanding a general change of the entire country.

**Uruguay:** Again, where a country seemed stable for a long period, after decades of “progressive government,” in November the Right-wing platform won the elections.

**Venezuela:** The dramatic Venezuelan know shows no hint of a long-term solution. The institutional crisis is deepened with the election of a legislative board of directors that excludes Guaidó, and the opposition is immersed in its own internal crisis.

**Central America:** The social destruction in Central America expels at an ever-increasing rate thousands of people fleeing for their lives, only to clash with AMLO's cross-border wall that provides jobs on a militarized southern border of Mexico, while deportations, abuses, and repression by the Mexican State skyrocket.

If we try to look at this general scenario, with all these political events (and those missing) of great significance in each country, there seems to be no other word to describe it: Moments of rupture, struggle, hope against defeat. The fragile, more or less republican, rules which, with the reluctance of the centuries-old oligarchies, were built up in several countries are crumbling before our eyes. And the trends for the future are contradictory and uncertain. Trying to understand them would imply a good pause for reevaluation with the immediate past, and from there, an attempt to draw some lessons and make a few hypotheses (at the risk of falling into generalizations):

# 1. The progressives were neither so progressive, nor the right so defeated.

It is not possible to understand the crises and conjunctures of Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina without referring to the “good times” when governments had popular legitimacy, leftist discourses, and redistributive policies, as well as their stories of attrition, transition, crisis, “betrayals” from within, electoral defeats, coups, and retreats. A common feature: before these governments there were struggles, political crises, popular insurrections, exemplary mobilizations with few social victories. In their moments of ascendancy, the traditional Right saw itself as disoriented and dispersed, in contrast to governments that decreed here, implemented there, paid homage one day and negotiated another. With the passing of months and years, the hopes they raised were diminished, the demands managed, and, when the moment demanded an open confrontation with the previous order, “responsible exits” were chosen and the movements were asked for calm, dialogue, and to listen.

The Right, in a relatively short time for the magnitude of the defeats suffered, recycled itself, renewed itself, and took the internal weaknesses of these governments as points on which to try to return to previous arrangements (with varying degrees of success), although, now it seems to be seen, without taking into account that the “years of progress” were not a parenthesis, but political cycles that makes it impossible for the Bolsonarios, Macris and

Morenos to reach a political stability that they could only achieve if they beat us to points of intensive therapy and, as we see, face struggles and resistance. None went as far to the Left as they said, nor did the others come back as strong as they dreamed.

## **2. The continent is not where things just go well (or romantically bad)**

While things were evolving in this way in countries with “progressive” governments, those that did not make this list, besides being a string of tragedies, appeared to be politically stable, “order and progress,” and had little expectation in the short term of breaking out of the role of imperial puppet. The Peruvian political crisis shows that social tensions can turn around in parallel with the very structural deficiencies of the political regimes and governing pacts. When regional analyses spoke of leftward turns in the region, important countries in the continental analysis, such as Colombia, Mexico and Chile, were omitted. A few months ago the focus turned to “returns of the Right” without foreseeing the political upheavals and earthquakes of the past year. So, thinking about the region, beyond estimating major general trends, requires paying attention to the contradictory and conflicting political flows, almost always in opposition to each other, depending on the moment and the country or group of countries referred to.

## **3. Public policies do not resolve class contradictions**

The so-called progressive governments were, and are, governments. Few are the cases in which the political order was disrupted at the constituting level (Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador), but even in these cases, the action of governments and their distance from the traditional oligarchies (beyond the social phenomena around them) focused on public welfare policies, focused on the most impoverished strata of society. Making a certain abstraction from the symbolic implications of some of these measures—such as the fact that the daughter of a family from a popular strata is the first in her family to have access to higher education and to travel by plane, and the affront this may be to racist local oligarchies—in the long term, and especially when economic cycles show signs of change, the deep class contradictions around key issues (the use and origin of income from resource extraction, debts, precarious working and retirement conditions, etc.) come to the surface. For the socialists, it is not a question of becoming popular critics of public policies (several of which are correct and minimal if one wants to live in societies that guarantee basic social rights), but rather of not losing focus on the fact that these policies, however well designed and implemented (even if any clientelist scent and germ of corruption is banished from them), have not managed to resolve social contradictions based on clashing class interests rather than on correct or incorrect government operations.

## **4. The price for winning governments is higher than in the contract signed (there is always interest and fine print)**

The path of progressive governments to presidential offices and parliamentary majorities, in general share, first, as mentioned above, a more or less extended period, while close to the electoral campaigns, of strong social struggles that, without being defeated, did not reach social victories either, except for exceptions such as the water war in Bolivia. A second possible common element was a winding and uphill path of political projects, the great majority of which were hyper-personalised, where a succession of defeats and small electoral advances were crowned with the ascent to central government. In some cases, like Lula and now AMLO, it was necessary to wait through more than two presidential elections to finally pass the electoral test that, more than a problem of popular acceptance, seemed

to be a problem of top-down acceptance, to what extent the oligarchies would or would not allow a government different from those with which they had not only come to an understanding, but also with those with which there were strong economic ties.

Reaching the government office, and ensuring respect for the electoral result by the oligarchies, forced progressive governments to open up to negotiation, to incorporate “traditional” cadres in some key positions, to establish red lines between which new political projects could enjoy a certain, conditioned, margin of freedom. The progressives were aware of the price to pay for access to government, and they sat down to negotiate and established the frameworks of “governance” in which they could enter the presidential palace. At first, it would seem that the margins at which an agreement would have been accepted would have been reasonable and that they did not compromise the essence of the projects they were promoting, of greater social justice, income distribution, etc. But politically, in the medium term, it became clear that what would end up being compromised was political capacity, and that they would have within their governmental structures some of the explanatory sources of their subsequent disasters. This is the case, for example, with Lenin Moreno or Temer.

## 5. Campism kills—and sectarianism more so

For the Latin American Left, orienting around some governments and their policies, when these do not come from the usual oligarchy, has been a headache. Although there are many nuances and changes in the way the debate within the Latin American left has been going on over time, I believe that two extreme positions can be considered, both of which are equally mistaken in this respect. On the one hand, what we have been defining as “campism,” and on the other hand a general sectarian posture. Although their political conclusions are conflicting, both share a hyper-simplified vision of complex and contradictory processes that therefore lead to very similar general positions for practically the entire continent.

In the case of campism, the basic position would correspond to a heritage of binary thinking, typical of the times of the Cold War, in which there would be a large “anti-imperialist” bloc that confronts in Latin America the great imperial power of the United States. In this way, every government and political formation with relative distance (even if only occasionally discursive) would be part of a more or less homogeneous bloc that clashes with the CIA, the White House and their Latin American representatives. They forget, suddenly, that the US imperialist presence in Latin America, although strongly prevalent, has become more complex in several countries, especially since the entry of Chinese imperialism into the region. Few countries, like Mexico, could still be considered almost absolute satellites of the United States.

On the other hand, the sectarian positions emphasize the not few contradictions of the progressive processes in order to, instead of forming a block against the traditional oligarchies, see in them simply a new political form, which would even serve to avoid “real revolutions” (guided by the sectarians, of course) otherwise inevitable and around the corner in this vision.

The implications of these positions—beyond how erratic their assessments may be—are in the political arena and have consequences, not infrequently serious ones. On the campist side, these visions, in addition to omitting the contradictions of the progressive processes themselves as explanatory elements of their different crises (since the only guilty party would be the Pentagon), have brought, for example, the shameful defense from spaces like the Sao Paulo Forum of Nicaragua’s criminal dictatorship. They see former Sandinista fighters, feminist activists, and in general a movement against draconian reforms to the pension system (which, in another context, that is against another government, the campists would unreservedly support) as Washington’s puppets, remaining silent about the arrests and the climate of repression established by Ortega to stay in power.

The sectarian counterpart we have closer, and we can see it in various ways [in a case where] the Latin American Left has doubted clear evidence: the consummation of a coup d'état in Bolivia. By sectarian thinking, there was no coup d'état (even siding with the fascist hordes!), but only a political conflict resulting from disputes "from above."

In both cases, Nicaragua and Bolivia, we see thousands of people mobilized in struggle and resistance, that put their lives at risk. Therefore the consequences of conditioning solidarity, coverage, and support are serious, and positions like ours must always avoid falling, due to temporary pressures, on one side or other, [instead] always thinking about the conditions for the people to advance, resist and win.

Somehow, as revolutionary socialist positions have long done, we find ourselves facing the drama of our frustrating organic weakness. If we can draw some conclusions, it is first of all that there is no political scenario, however stable it may seem, that will last a hundred years. Especially so during the last few years. The Latin American region has been changing dramatically and, now, the outcome of the moment is quite open. With contradictory signals, very good and hopeful news is contrasted with harsh blows and defeats. Where the path to build independent and mass political alternatives is complex, the Latin American experience shows possibilities. It is important to build bridges between the orbits of movements and resistances (which resist without a political horizon) and the squalor of the political arena. It is also crucial to be aware of the fact that, in the face of the political crises that different Latin American countries are going through, the position taken on these events must, despite the contradictions, be clear and beyond doubt. The moment demands it: we cannot hesitate to condemn the coup in Bolivia, nor can we hesitate to condemn Ortega as a dictator. Latin American experiences should be a mirror in which the revolutionaries of each country look at ourselves in order to be better prepared for the struggles to come.

As is also often taken for granted continental analyses, Mexico is assumed as a counter-example, a general counter-tendency, always a prisoner of its demonic border with the empire, as seems to be repeated today. A last sentence on this subject, from Marx, who in the prologue of *Capital* warned the proud German nationalists, incredulous at the possibility that their country would follow the path marked by England in *Capital*: "This history is about you."

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[1] See PRT, 29 October 2019, "[Haiti: ¡Ningún muerto solo! ¡Ningún muerto sin importancia!](#)".