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Latin America

“Latin America has once again entered a period of strong social and political turbulence”

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Franck Gaudichaud recently wrote and coordinated two collective works drawing a critical assessment of “progressive” political attempts to challenge neoliberal hegemony in Latin America. In this interview, he considers the social and political dynamics of the recent period, and also current issues in the region. The interview was conducted by Rosa Moussaoui, journalist and senior reporter for the newspaper *L'Humanité*.

What is the common political thread to what you call the “progressive experiences” of the early twenty-first century in Latin America?

This characterization is admittedly vague. If we employ it, it is because the people concerned use it themselves, from the Kirchners in Argentina to Alvaro Garcia Linera in Bolivia. These actors, in their diversity, have built a common political space which they have chosen to call “progressive”. This category therefore appears legitimate to us, even if these progressive “left” governments have had very different experiences. On the one hand, there are “national popular” experiences, more or less “radical” in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. And on the other, experiences more oriented towards the centre left, including forms of social-liberalism, like the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay (among others, under the terms of office of José “Pepe” Mujica), the Brazil of Lula then of Dilma Rousseff. But beyond the category, there are many points in common during the “golden age” of *progresismo*: a return of the state, criticism of neoliberalism, developmentalist aims. With very heterogeneous political practices.

What were the roots of the longevity of these governments, in contexts traditionally marked by political instability?

Now that we have more critical distance on this “cycle” which extended more or less from 1998 (the election of Chavez) to 2016 (the dismissal of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil), and which is in fact far from over, it can be seen that it coincides with a long period of high commodity prices. This windfall linked to this made possible in the medium term a return of conditioned social programs (sometimes qualified as assistance), plans to fight against poverty, and development policies. There was therefore a favourable economic situation on the international scene, and at the same time a search for responses to the crisis of hegemony which hit neoliberalism at the end of the 1990s. In this context, a number of progressive political forces tried to renew or create from scratch links with popular movements, to rely on a new social base and several plebeian revolts (in Bolivia and Ecuador in particular) to confront the neoliberal and conservative right.

So, redistribution and social inclusion policies could be deployed only in phases of economic prosperity?

In any case, this is one of the contradictions, one of the Achilles heels of these recent Latin American experiences. What took shape then was neither a perpetuation of neoliberalism nor a transformation with anti-capitalist aims. Basically, it was the establishment of a new inter-class social pact, admittedly more redistributive, but also involving the dominant classes, who greatly benefited from the economic boom (they have been greatly enriched in Brazil, in Ecuador and elsewhere). One of the paradigms of these alliances is probably the PT government’s management (under Lula and Dilma Rousseff), with the establishment of a conservative pact of social order and including reforms that the right had not succeeded in getting through, in particular on the capitalization of pensions. Some authors talk of the attempt to build “an inclusive neoliberalism”, under the leadership of the centre-left, giving guarantees of stability to capital, while channelling popular demands (see for example the work of Valery Arcary, André Singer or Ruy Braga). With this new pact or socio-political equilibrium, positive responses to the social emergency have taken shape, the traditional and “white” oligarchies have even been clearly displaced from state leadership in certain

countries (in Venezuela and Bolivia, for example). But this balance was fragile, with the maintenance of class borders, but also ethno-racial, gender or even territorial domination, as well as a social structure which remained very unequal. With, also, the strong dependence of these redistributive policies on the international situation within the framework of a profoundly violent international division of labour.

What has hindered the ending of reliance on commodities, especially the oil and gas revenue?

This is the other big debate, sometimes conducted in a rather caricatural way. The choice is not between extractivism unleashed in the name of development and a “heap of gold” on which we would sit while resigning ourselves to poverty, to use the expression of the former Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa. The work of the economist Pierre Salama, and also many others, highlights a great paradox. Historically, in Latin America, the left was opposed to dependence, to relationships inherited from colonialism. However, these ten, fifteen years of *progresismo* have strengthened the extractivist matrix. The state has certainly gained ground over private actors. But dependence on raw materials has been reinforced, multinationals have done well, we have even seen the effects of early deindustrialisation and the financialization of intensive agriculture, in particular in Argentina and Brazil. Obviously, foreign currency has poured in. But at the cost of serious social, political and environmental impacts. Because the problem is not only economic: extractivism is a *specific political regime* which favours authoritarianism, encourages corruption, generates tensions with social, feminist and indigenous movements, devastates lands, fragments the popular classes. On the other hand, it is obvious that no Latin American country will be able to emerge from extractivism and neo-colonialism on its own overnight. This raises the question of regional and international cooperation. To ask Bolivia to leave all its lithium under the Salar d'Uyuni (one of the biggest reserves in the world), thus giving up, with no concrete alternatives on the horizon, income allowing it to face the social, health and educational emergency would be absurd. It is therefore the question of the eco-social, industrial and technological transitions to be constructed which remains posed in a post-capitalist democratic perspective.

These progressive experiences often took on a pro-sovereignty tone. In this political movement, to what extent has the aspiration for national independence been decisive?

The national question has been central in the face of the agenda of the United States, of neoliberalism, against the Washington consensus as it prevailed in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium. There was a national and popular reaction. Thus, *Chavismo* fits well into a historical Latin American genealogy, that of big movements such as Peronism in Argentina or Cardenism in Mexico. There is therefore, in these experiences, a “populist” dimension in the historical sense. The press uses this term in a normative and pejorative way, to disqualify, but if we take this question seriously, “left populism” has been at the heart of these processes, in line with the theories of Ernesto Laclau. Hence the interest in paying attention to the debates and misuse that this notion arouses. Can we claim to be “the people” as a political subject in an unambiguous way, without taking into account its contradictions and through a “logic of equivalence” which would erase all differentiation? Can left-wing populism thus smooth out class differences? In my opinion, no. This is one of the tensions that shaped these political experiences. The question of “caudillismo”, hyper-presidentialism, the exclusive incarnation by a charismatic leader is also problematic when we speak of the autonomy of social movements, participation and democratic invention. Even if figures like Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, Lula have crystallized moments of an anti-oligarchic political tipping point, at a given moment.

The constituent processes of the 2000s in Bolivia and Ecuador inaugurated the plurinational state. What were the implications of this, in practice? Has it paved the way for genuine efforts at decolonization?

The recognition of the plurinational state marked a clear step in this direction, with the recognition of linguistic diversity, of community rights. But there is still a long way to go. Bolivian historian Silvia Rivera Cusican sums up the issue as follows: “The decolonial is a fashionable neologism, the postcolonial is a desire, the anti-colonial is a

struggle.” Everything remains to be built, and constitutional changes are only one step. By also refraining from essentializing the indigenous movement, which is also plural and contradictory in its political options, in its ways of functioning, as we can see now in Ecuador in favour of the presidential campaign.

Striking images reached us from Mexico on 8 March of the presidential palace in which Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador was barricaded awaiting the demonstrations painting on these palisades the names of thousands of murdered women. Why has the Latin American left, in power, so often remained deaf to feminist demands, which nevertheless have given substance to powerful social movements?

These governments have failed to overcome patriarchal, even masculinist reflexes, in societies that have remained very conservative, where the churches retain decisive political weight, where it is not necessarily popular to side with feminists. Feminist movements have been built in and through autonomy, often in confrontation with leftist forces, which are struggling to shake off a macho culture (internally and in their discourse). But this, alas, is not unique to Latin America. From this point of view, the legalization of abortion in Argentina marks a turning point. This conquest is indeed that of mobilized women: it was under the pressure of a powerful movement that *Kirchnerismo*, which has long cultivated ambiguity on this subject, made this political gesture. The strength of Chilean feminists is also exemplary in this regard.

What paths can be opened up by the popular uprising in Chile and the ongoing constituent process in a country that was the laboratory of neoliberalism for the continent and even the world?

The force of the October 2019 uprising shifted all borders, unpredictably. This popular eruption completely reshaped the political landscape and shook the oligarchy, in the first place conservative President Sebastian Piñera. But paradoxically, a large part of the representatives of the social movement could be excluded from the future Constitutional Convention, due to a majority of the political forces represented in parliament concluding an “agreement for social peace. and the Constitution” in November 2019, with the objective of diluting the strength of this popular rebellion in institutional frameworks, but also of limiting the scope of the future constituent election. Part of the left lent itself to this game - not the Chilean Communist Party. Everything has been done to restrict the representative character of the mobilized forces and independent candidates, to ensure the hegemony of the “big parties”. The right has in particular ensured a blocking minority within the Convention which will be elected in mid-May, because any article will have to be validated by a qualified majority of two thirds of the constituents. The construction of a considerable balance of forces is necessary for the neoliberalism inherited from the Pinochet era and the unchallenged power of the dominant classes to be really threatened in Chile. Especially since the levels of state repression and violence have been, and are, extremely high. However, emancipatory horizons remain open: Chilean feminists, for example, have decided to join this process, by nominating candidates, while denouncing the limits of this Constitutional Convention, and by insisting on the need to continue to organize “from below”, through territorial assemblies. This is only the start of a very long road, but a new period has just opened in Chile.

Venezuela, which set the tone at the dawn of these experiences of social transformation in Latin America, is today brandished by the neoliberal right as the worst of scarecrows. The strategic failure of the insurrectionary right led by Juan Guaido is now evident. Can we hope, with the alternation in Washington, for an easing, or even a lifting of the sanctions that are strangling the country, prior to any exit from the crisis?

The country is now caught in a terrible, abysmal stalemate and crisis, that sums up the current Venezuelan drama. First, indeed, the strategy of (illegitimate and illegal) imperial blockade chosen by the United States is a failure and that of the self-proclaimed “interim president” Juan Guaido has shipwrecked a large part of the opposition to the government. Sectors of the Trump-backed “insurgency right” have failed: with the support of the armed forces and the tight control of the state apparatus, Nicolas Maduro is far more resilient than their calculations would suggest. At

the same time, this Venezuelan crisis has seriously damaged the prospects, the legitimacy and the discourse of the Latin American left, in particular those who still refuse to open their eyes after six years of collapse. The crisis obviously has external and central geopolitical reasons: US aggression, the economic boycott strategy adopted by Washington, the fall in the price per barrel. But there is also the powerful affirmation of the clearly authoritarian, Bonapartist and regressive tendencies of *Madurismo*, the enrichment by corruption of the new ruling classes, which led to the emergence (under Chávez) of a “Bolibourgeoisie”, which treats the state as booty, with hundreds of millions of dollars flowing out of the country each year, the role of the police in controlling popular neighbourhoods, the criminalization of dissent, the growth of the military in political and economic management as a part of popular *Chavismo* moves away. At the economic level, in addition to the practices of massive extractivism and mining concessions on the banks of the Orinoco, the government has been engaged in recent months in a real policy of neoliberal adjustment and partial privatization, a crying paradox for whoever claims to be part of the Bolivarian “revolution”. The “anti-blockade law” of October 2020, intended to attract foreign investment, is also “supra-constitutional” legislation which opens the country even more to private capital (particularly Chinese, Iranian and Russian) and to the deregulation-privatization of common goods under public control. This trend could be consolidated with the recent announcement of the creation of “special economic zones”, which is also a way of acknowledging widespread neglect in the management of several big public enterprises, including the oil firm PDVSA. In short, we cannot think of alternatives to neoliberalism in Latin America by simply denouncing the odious diktats of Washington, and by closing our eyes to the internal situation and to the drama that the Venezuelan people are living through.

The Venezuelan crisis has given rise to a massive exodus. Poverty, inequality, the frequency of natural disasters linked to climate change also give rise to vast migratory movements, in the direction of the US mirage. Are these migratory movements set to accelerate?

Unfortunately, everything suggests they are. Recent studies by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) point to this humanitarian disaster and an acceleration in these migratory movements. In ten years, the number of immigrants and emigrants in the region has increased tenfold. Firstly because of the Venezuelan crisis, with around five million people leaving the country, the largest intra-Latin American migration in history! More than 40 million people on the continent now live outside their country, with an impressive number of departures from Central America to the United States. These immigrants are prey to multiple acts of violence, they are at the mercy of criminal networks, often linked to drug trafficking or prostitution. And women and children are at the heart of the turmoil. The climate crisis, the effects of which are severely felt in Latin America, will amplify these phenomena in the future. And here again the responsibility of the countries of the North is engaged.

However, in the equation of what you diagnose as an “exhaustion” of these progressive experiences, how much is due to external interference and how much to internal political factors?

This is precisely one of the great debates on the Latin American left for almost a decade. Where should we place the cursor? You have to think dialectically and on several levels, yet it is not very original to say this, but a certain stress on the “geopolitical focus” tends to overwhelm the rest in the analyses of some observers or activists. We saw this again very clearly during the presidential election in Ecuador, where supporters of *Correísmo* sought to systematically caricature the candidacy of Yaku Pérez, of the indigenous confederation (CONAIE). There has been a decline, even a crisis of progressive governments, even if it is not an “end of the cycle” - we are even witnessing a notable rebound (Bolivia, Argentina, Mexico, tomorrow perhaps Peru or Brazil). We are nevertheless talking about the end of a “golden age”, combining high rents, economic growth, reduction in poverty, articulation between movements and governments, new regional integrations and South-South cooperation, decline in US influence, and so on. Some unilaterally blame these reversals and setbacks on imperialism and US foreign policy, from a “campist” perspective.

Others - and I am among them - find it reductive to stick to this simplistic diagnosis and draw attention to internal contradictions and impasses: loss of connection with popular movements, bureaucratization or the emergence of new

castes, frenzied neo-extractivism. A “left” which wanted to change power was trapped by the verticality of the state machine, by state capitalism too, which sucked some of the lifeblood from the left or from the social movements. We must also mention the problem of corruption, sometimes massive, which has done a lot of harm and on a regional scale. All these elements have contributed to straining relations between these executives and those who brought them to power: the mobilized popular classes, indigenous and peasant movements, workers’ unions, critical feminists and intellectuals, environmentalists. In the most extreme cases, these tensions are reflected by phenomena of sustained state repression, as in the case of Daniel Ortega’s Nicaragua. In others by a relative weakening of the social democratic consensus, as with the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay. Between the two, there are a thousand shades of grey.

Under Donald Trump, and even under Barack Obama, the United States initiated a relative shift from the Middle East, while focusing more on Latin America, which they consider to be their “backyard”. What were the political consequences of this movement on the continent?

It is true that there has been a desire on the part of Washington to reinvest in Latin American territory, in an attempt to stem Chinese competition and reactivate the Monroe doctrine. The emerging policy of the Biden administration in this area must also be seen in the light of this merciless economic war with Beijing. The “institutional” coups that began as early as 2009 and 2012 in Honduras and Paraguay were ultimately legitimized or recognized by the United States. There is also the relentless aggression against Venezuela since 2002 (and also against Bolivia) which has had criminal consequences for the people, or the continued blockade of Cuba for more than 50 years. We must also analyse the maintenance of a dense network of military bases throughout the region, the role of the OAS (in the dismissal of Evo Morales, for example) or the deployment of the Fourth Fleet. But, at the risk of insisting, that does not exhaust the question of the strategic contradictions of *progresismo*. The wound caused by the crisis of the Bolivarian process must obviously be analysed in this sense.

You mention the fierce competition between Beijing and Washington in Latin America. Is China replicating the strategy already deployed elsewhere in the South, in particular in Africa?

Yes, a similar strategy seems to be at work, with geopolitical stakes which are even “heavier” than in Africa, since China is competing with the United States for economic and geostrategic opportunities in what is their historical “backyard”: it is a question of competing with the US giant on its own turf. Beijing has just overtaken the EU to rank as the subcontinent’s second largest trading partner. It is now the biggest trading partner of Brazil and Chile and ranks second in terms of trade volumes with Mexico, which is linked to the United States by a free trade treaty. Xi Ji Ping plans \$250 billion in additional investment by 2025 in Latin America: the movement is accelerating at breakneck speed. Beyond investments, what China covets are raw materials, but also control of key companies and markets on Latin American soil, and from there throughout the continent, including the United States. And on this ground, the practices deployed by the Middle Kingdom are much more a matter of hegemony and aggressive asymmetry than of “South-South solidarity”, despite the rhetoric. The difference with the United States is - at this point - that the Chinese are not setting up military bases in the region.

With the arrival of Joe Biden in the White House, should we expect a shift in US policies in Latin America?

Trump’s defeat certainly inflicts a setback on the most outrageous versions of the right and the far right in the Americas, first and foremost Bolsonaro. However, there should be no illusions about this alternation. This is not a value judgment: just listen to what Joe Biden and his Secretary of State Antony Blinken are saying. They are determined to regain a foothold in Latin America against China, in an interventionist manner. This is a central geostrategic issue for them. They are maintaining the blockade against Caracas, in the midst of a pandemic, further suffocating the health system of this country and continue to recognize the putchist Juan Guaido as the legitimate representative of Venezuela, thus assuming a line of continuity with Trump. As for the embargo against Cuba, there

is no question, for the moment, of actually easing it. In fact, behind Blinken's multilateralist speeches, intended to seduce NATO allies, the fundamentals remain and the “Monroe 2.0 doctrine” still prevails in Latin America: support for Plan Colombia, a policy of aggression against governments deemed hostile, hegemonic aims on the whole continent, maintenance of an immense military deployment, strengthening of “soft power” and support for various civil society organizations in the name of “democracy” and so on.

In this strategy of US hegemony, will Colombia remain a pivot?

Washington relies on “friendly” governments including Santiago de Chile, Bogota and Brasilia to anchor its influence in the region. The United States also cultivates its influence through the OAS. Colombia, where President Iván Duque agreed the Havana peace accords concluded in 2016 with the former FARC guerrillas, still offers the United States, at the military level, a fundamental strategic platform for the whole region (which is not the case with Brazil, a notable difference). Colombia is an essential bridgehead and as such receives hundreds of millions of dollars both militarily and through cooperation between states and through NGOs. Bodies like the Lima Group also reflect the desire to promote groups of influence, bringing together countries aligned with Washington. But with the alternation in Mexico, the return of the left in Bolivia, soon perhaps in Ecuador, eventually in Brazil (with Lula’s return to the political game), these calculations are weakened. The US administration therefore views with some fear the possible return of more autonomous regional integration structures (such as UNASUR and CELAC) if ever a “progressive axis” is reactivated. But there is nothing to say that a new dynamic is really set in motion in this direction as the economic crisis and the pandemic are taking their toll and every country is fighting for itself.

Neoliberal restoration everywhere has resulted in economic disaster, recession, explosion of toxic debt. Does economic efficiency now belong to the progressive camp?

If we have to take a critical look at the results of progressive experiences in order to think about the future, we must see that neoliberal-conservative restoration is catastrophic. The right shows itself incapable of creating the conditions for economic stability, and it conforms to ever more authoritarian neoliberal practices. It is a complete failure: whether it regains control through the ballot box as in Argentina with Mauricio Macri or in Uruguay, or seizes power by a coup, as in Bolivia, or does so following months of institutional and democratic destabilization, as in Brazil. This opens the door to the return of *progresismo*, which then appears as a “desirable” or at least possible alternative for millions of people, especially after the economic successes of 2005-2012 (a country like Bolivia saw its GDP tripled under the governments of Evo Morales!). And when the right remains in power (in Chile or Colombia for example), they have to face a return of large popular mobilizations. This is the whole problem for the dominant classes, in this period of deep crisis and pandemic: the right no longer embodies a credible alternative, a guarantee of stability for capital. Or when they do, it’s in the form of an extreme and fascist right wing, like that of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Nevertheless, the arrival of “late” *progresismo* as in Mexico with Lopez Obrador or the electoral return of the centre-left in certain countries is in no way synonymous with a guarantee of a return to a period of growth and stability. Latin America - like the rest of the world - has entered a period of strong turbulence, which combines a gigantic economic crisis, the very significant impact of the health crisis in structurally unequal societies, the deepening of the biosphere and climate crisis, and finally a new social, political and ideological polarization. This, against the backdrop of a dangerous rise of reactionary, evangelical and “alternative” far rights, who are mobilizing increasingly massively within the popular layers. The stake is there, for the emancipatory lefts and the antagonistic social movements: either the possibility of radical democratic alternatives or the possibility of the multiplication of phenomena like *Bolsonarismo*.

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