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Latin America

Latin America: is the progressive era over?

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Does the return of neoliberals to government in certain Latin American countries question the experiences of emancipation in recent decades? The realities are more complex, Franck Gaudichaud, university lecturer and co-president of France Amérique Latine tells us. The interview was conducted by Michèle Kiintz.

What has become of the “attempts at alternatives, local or national enfranchisements, in construction” that you have previously referred to?

Rather than an “end of cycle” in Latin America, the theme of many current debates, we are witnessing a turnaround in the socio-political conjuncture and more exactly the reflux of the progressive or national-popular forces in several key countries, notably Venezuela where the opposition now controls Parliament and where there is a huge economic and political crisis, and in Brazil, with the parliamentary coup which has led to the dismissal of Dilma Rousseff, and where there is a dissatisfaction among some of the popular and middle layers with the balance sheet of the Workers' Party (PT) and, even more, faced with the current corrupt conservative government. Other symbols of this reflux are Argentina, with the arrival of the neoliberal Mauricio Macri, who is the man of the employers and the multinationals, as a result of the failure in the presidential elections of Cristina Kirchner. We could continue as well - but to a much lesser extent - with the defeat of Evo Morales in Bolivia in the last referendum, even if Morales is still popular. Finally, there are many tensions and open conflicts between social-environmental movements, trade unions or indigenous peoples and the Correa government in Ecuador.

These political and electoral setback relating to what we can call for the sake of convenience “progressive governments” and the new political forces that have been hegemonic in a dozen South American countries since 2002-2005 is accompanied by a critical balance on the question of extractivism and the use of natural resources, as regards the new dependency of economies, on modes of development and production, a debate led by some sectors of the social movements and indigenous peoples, as well as by currents of the anti-capitalist left (which remains very much a minority). A balance sheet which, on the level of the social advances and the reconstruction of a social state in these various countries, is clearly positive compared with the neoliberal period earlier, as regularly pointed out by the Brazilian sociologist Emir Sader and various intellectuals concerning the progressive governments. However, we need to go beyond the state and institutional level to see also the popular effervescence which continues, “from below” and from the left, in terms of self-organization, creation of self managed spaces, recuperated enterprises, indigenous communities who take control of their territory and oppose the multinational companies (like the Shuar in Ecuador), or community media within the popular neighborhoods, urban or rural (such as Radio Villa Francia or Channel SeÑal3 in Santiago in Chile).

This effervescence can also be seen in the Zapatista construction in Mexico with the idea of the nomination of an indigenous woman for the next presidential elections, supported by an indigenous council, which is excellent news (after years of retreat on their land in Chiapas). These are also the communal councils and rural cooperative organizations existing in the framework of the Bolivarian process, some of which are still dynamic: the idea of communal construction continues despite the deep current decomposition. And despite the constant attacks against recuperated enterprises in Argentina, we can speak of conquest over the long term for dozens of them. In the Cauca in Colombia or in Cuba innovative experiences in agro-ecology are conducted and so on. Therefore, despite a certain reflux “above” and the return of the right wing, and also the neoliberal, imperialist, military, paramilitary and drug related violence (in Mexico, Colombia, Central America), there is a set of experiences that places on the agenda the strategic debate on how to transform the world and distribute power, on the need to combine construction from below without abandoning the radical transformation of the state - but the limits of the progressive movement of the decade shows how difficult that is.

Has there been a political translation of the popular movements in the institutionalized powers, in the state structures of the different countries?

We come back to the debate (intense since the end of the 1990s) on “changing the world without taking (state) power” or, on the contrary, having as objective the conquest of the government and of the state via the ballot box to forge a counter-hegemony in the face of neo-liberalism in liaison with the social movements. It is overall a false dichotomy. The terms of the debate are no longer in any case - for the moment?- as in the 1970s, the “armed road” against “institutional transition”. It can be seen that the major part of new political movements on the left, or old ones like the PT, took note, sometimes even before the fall of the Wall, of the weight of the institutions and the electoral moments to try to build a political space. But this does not prevent the dilemma being always there: when you win the government, do you seize real power? The economic, military, media, class power finally is to a large degree elsewhere: the “deep” state is much wider than the government alone, and even than parliament and the representative institutions. This real power is often difficult to conquer, even more to transform. Hence the importance of insisting on self-organization, the ability to construct at the local, regional or national level forms of constituent popular power, which can develop finally into constituted popular power.

Yet the control of states by the left has allowed the most important social advances of the decade in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia or Venezuela. And if the question of the link between the instituting and the instituted, between movements and parties, remains essential, learning the lessons of the great Latin American revolutionary processes of the twentieth century, Mexico, El Salvador, Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, and so on, is just as much so. What rupture at a given time with the old forms of state organization, within the armed forces? This is the whole difficulty of the social transformation that is underway, for example in Bolivia. This has also been the subject of discussions on the left during the recent presidential campaign in Ecuador between Alianza PaÑ-s and other sectors which drew up a balance sheet which was very critical of the technocratic management of Correa: on the expansion of the mining frontier, deforestation, the massive extraction of resources for the benefit of the multinationals. This is a real question directly related to modes of production, accumulation and the exploitation of nature which is continuing.

How have relations evolved between the Latin American countries and the efforts at consolidation of regional partnership?

The regional integrations are also effectively essential. We cannot draw up a balance sheet of the different progressive governments, without thinking about their margins of actual maneuver at the continental level and in the face of the imperial powers (to begin with the USA). A “small country”, a country impoverished by neocolonial pillage like Bolivia, can hardly emerge alone from unequal exchange, internal oligarchic domination and inequality. To create alternatives, it needs partnerships, inter-state associations and also an active internationalism between popular movements. The Cuban experience reminds us that isolation (and blockade) accelerate the internal involutions. Bolivar’s dream, which Hugo Chávez highlighted, i.e. a perspective of Bolivarian anti-imperialist integration, is an issue of a crushing contemporary relevance. And the reflux of the progressive governments and movements is also linked to its absence. The regional evolution has however undergone some quite interesting advances. For example the project of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) was quite original, when it was driven by Chávez, that is to say the possibility of “bartering” between countries, a complementary relationship, of receiving more than one gives if it is a small economy, for example receiving Venezuelan oil to lower the price of food a bit, when it is a small island like Dominica or even Cuba. The project is interesting, but it quickly entered into crisis at the same time as the crisis of the Bolivarian process, and has also encountered other barriers (including the contradictory interests of the Brazilian regime).

We should also stress the very significant political and diplomatic progress, with the construction from 2009 of the UNASUR, the Union of South American Nations: for the first time the 22 South American countries are grouped within a diplomatic entity, also for the management and settlement of conflicts, without the OAS (Organization of American States) and therefore without the United States. Then in 2010, comes the CELAC, the Community of Latin

American and Caribbean States, which thinks of Latin America without the giants of the North, a progress which has allowed the reintegration of Cuba in the Latin American concert, even before the restoration of relations between Cuba and the United States.

What is the nature of the forces of opposition to the progressive governments still in place or those that have been overthrown as in Brazil?

The panorama is dark enough at this level, with the return of the neoliberal and conservative right and the emergence of new rights which have “restyled” the old oligarchies a little. This is the case, for example, with Macri in Argentina and his movement *Compromiso para el cambio* (“Commitment for Change”), which has used and abused political marketing to give a “modern” face. But these new or former rights remain socially violent, marked from the point of view of class and they defend the project of the globalized bourgeoisie, with on the societal level an ultraconservative vision which is repressive of the social movements.

In Brazil, the impeachment against Dilma Rouseff is a victory of the most reactionary sectors, that of the “4 B”s (for bullets, bible, beef and banks), that is to say the armaments and security sector, evangelists, large landowners and the financial sector. These are also the most corrupt, starting with Temer, the current illegitimate president, because even if the PT leadership is also imbued with the culture of clientelist corruption, it is still a little less so than those who are today at the head of the Brazilian state. Let us recall that the current situation is also the product of unnatural alliances between the PT and these sectors, since today it is the former allies of the PT who have turned their coats and allied themselves with the most reactionary right. In Venezuela, the majority of the National Assembly is in the hands of the opposition, the MUD (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*), a heterogeneous coalition but with an openly neoliberal hard core, with two tendencies: an “insurreccional” sector (those who supported the coup of April 2002 and the *guarimbas* (street barricades) in 2014, therefore violence on the streets, led by Leopoldo López, currently imprisoned and characterized as a “political prisoner” by the opposition); and another group of parties which seeks more of an institutional path, believing that after having won control of parliament, the request for a recall referendum which has been underway for more than a year could lead to the dismissal of Maduro by the ballot box. Which is very likely given the state of disrepair of the country, the magnitude of the economic crisis, and the dimension of corruption and patronage at all levels of the state, from whence the authoritarian responses of the government which has done everything to prevent this referendum being held up to now. Overall, we are faced with the hard right, supported by Washington, whose escalation in power allows a realignment of the stars in the direction of the United States and its two major allies, namely Mexico and Colombia. And now, we also have Argentina and Brazil which are pressuring other “non-aligned” governments such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia.

Can we speak of a more or less rapid return to a “long neo-liberal night”? And are there still potential popular outbursts to counter this?

At the end of the 1990s, there was a period of great popular struggles against this “long neoliberal night”, and these exceptional social movements combined with the crisis of legitimacy of the traditional political parties led to a dozen South American countries moving to the left, with a certain diversity - center left, national-popular left, social-liberal or more anti-imperialist. We could add to this list Nicaragua in particular, or Honduras before the coup. In many cases, the traditional parties of local bourgeoisies were marginalized (Social Democrats, Christian Democrats or Conservatives), which opened a window of opportunity for the popular movements, to strengthen those political forces which seemed more open to change, for example the PT in Brazil, or to create new forces like *Alianza PaÑ-s* (Ecuador), the Bolivian MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*), or the Fifth Republic Movement (*Movimiento V RepÑblica*) in Venezuela around Hugo Chávez and so on. The successive electoral victories of these left governments allowed in particular the creation of important “targeted” social programmes (not universal, therefore) in Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, or Uruguay: poverty has thus declined as never before, during the decade 2000-2010; with, in parallel, conquests on social rights, wages, education, a decline in illiteracy and so on. For a decade, the very high price of raw materials led to a redistribution of profits from natural resources, while “arranging the goat and cabbage”,

capital and labor, in a perspective which was typically “neo-developmental”. With a barrel at more than a hundred dollars, it was possible to redistribute part of the oil or gas profits towards social programs for the poorest, but without destabilizing or attacking the fundamental interests of the dominant classes

Inequalities have also declined, but the class social structure has been maintained. Yet, the old white (and racist) oligarchies, the dominant classes have taken a very dim view of seeing previously marginalized actors rise up, and win: indigenous peoples, trade unionists, women, priests supportive of liberation theology, who arrived at the center of politics and brought with them - but in a subordinate manner - part of the increasingly politicized subordinate classes. Are we today facing a return to the long night of neo-liberalism? A return as such, to the 1990s, no. There have been profound changes, which remain. For example the progressive national-popular space is still either in government, or the main opposition force in a number of countries. It remains in government in Venezuela, Ecuador with a probable victory of Lenín Moreno (the successor to Correa); in Bolivia where Evo Morales, despite the defeat of the last referendum, has enough electoral support to consider a re-election. In other countries this progressive space is the main opposition force: Peronism Of course, and Kirchnerism in Argentina; the PT today is very weakened, marked by the cases of corruption (Petrobras, Odebrecht), criticized by a part of the left and the youth, the working class, and the trade union movements for its balance sheet. But it remains a big institutional party of opposition in the face of the neo-liberal right.

What we must see above all is the capacity of popular movements, of the anti-capitalist or eco-socialist left (like the FIT in Argentina) to draw critical balance sheets of the national progressive-popular period, but also the construction of unitary fronts to oppose the hard, violent, neoliberal, right, and the renewed agenda of Washington, over the next few years. Some critical intellectuals, such as for example Massimo Modenesi (Mexico), Raul Zibechi (Uruguay) or Maristella Svampa (Argentina), show that progressivism has in part disarmed the autonomy of popular movements, their capacity to respond, that they have found themselves caught in the clientelist webs, sometimes even in the spheres of integration into the apparatus of the state (in Argentina, for example). A phenomenon reinforced by the caudillismo or “hyper-presidentialism” underway, because if the charismatic leadership can effectively mobilize or politicize “those below” they hinder and are an obstacle to attempts at self-management and popular power. Without counting the various forms of open criminalization of social movements (in Ecuador or Brazil for example), while in Ecuador an intellectual like Alberto Acosta describes a “conservative restoration”. Pablo Davalos refers to “disciplinary democracy” to analyze the post-neoliberal experiences. All this has sapped the capacity of resistance, even if major struggles are coming in the new situation.

Also, in Argentina, the class struggle trade union movement is in the process of organizing itself in the face of the war machine that is the Macri government, which has laid off more than 100,000 people and will attack employment rights. In Venezuela, a defeat for Maduro would signal the return of a right wing bent on class vengeance, which wants to undo the conquests of popular Chavismo in terms of organization but also of social rights. In Peru, an openly neoliberal right governs, with very significant levels of repression, notably of indigenous struggles around the Conga mining project. If we look at what is happening in Mexico for some years, with a permanent brutalization of society and of the popular struggles, the future may seem bleak indeed. But still with glimmers of hope, as shown by the massive mobilizations underway for a few weeks now against the measures of the federal government of Peña Nieto. There are then serious things at stake, in a scenario which is very complex. If there is a resurgence, a capacity of resistance, the question today is that of alternatives. Will we try to recompose the PT or Kirchnerism? Or draw balance sheets and rebuild an eco-socialist anti-capitalist left, with all the independent social and political sectors that are ready?

What will the Trump era mean for Latin America?

That is THE problem of the moment, it seems to me. We have already seen the violent, racist, xenophobic relationship of Trump with the Chicanos and with all Latin Americans, undocumented workers in the United States, with promises and a beginning of mass deportations. It must be remembered that Obama also deported hundreds of

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thousands of people without papers, just as he did not put an end to the warlike imperial policy of the United States, quite the contrary! But with Trump, the danger is even greater. The announcement on the extension of the wall with Mexico is a strong symbol of his politics of hate. Trump is challenging the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba, and could threaten the peace process in Colombia.

This is not without contradictory effects. Let us remember that if the Zapatista movement publicly arose at the beginning of 1994 in Mexico it was also to fight against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Today, it is Trump who denounces this Agreement. It is a paradox of history. The reactionary populism and protectionism of Trump is also opposed to some multilateral, or even bilateral, neoliberal agreements. Also, he questions the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), in which countries such as Chile, Peru and Mexico were also engaged. Michèle Bachelet has finally announced that Chile will also withdraw from the Treaty since the United States was no longer participating. It is not therefore the social movements that have defeated this treaty, but a hegemonic reactionary force in the North, the United States. Some analysts are glad of these unexpected consequences of the election of Trump. It seems to me that we should not mistake our allies! Because if Trump calls into question these treaties, it is to defend even more the selfish interests of the United States, impose new still tougher agreements and in no case to abandon the hegemony of Washington in Latin America (over natural resources, fresh water, rare earth, agricultural land, Venezuelan oil, Chilean copper and so on). Even if for the moment nothing suggests that the region is part of its immediate priorities. Yet, if the balance sheet of Obama's geopolitics is awful enough, what is coming may be even more so in terms of global chaos.

There are therefore great struggles to be fought, and also the need to reorganize internationalist solidarity with Latin America and its popular movements. That is what we are trying to do - modestly - through the Association France Amérique Latine, and I take this opportunity to invite readers to support us and to join us!