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Latin America

Latin America and the global reactionary wave

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Introduction

The reality of the current turn to the right in Latin America is as evident as its instability. Do not be fooled: this is not about any impasse or “hegemonic draw”. The relationship of forces is worse than in the previous cycle, as is evident in the emergence of an authoritarian phenomenon in Brazil, the “moderate” turn of Kirchnerismo, the permanent coup threats in Venezuela or the risks of right-wing victories in Bolivia and Uruguay. However, the shift to the right in Latin America law is based on a still fluctuating dynamic with some palpable ripostes: the victory of AMLO and the fall of the old regime in Mexico, the overwhelming electoral defeat of Macri in Argentina, the bogging down of imperialism and the right in Venezuela, the vitality of some social movements (especially the feminist movement, but also the workers’ movement in some countries). In Brazil the result is also ambiguous at the moment: Bolsonaro is advancing significantly with his major reforms (pensions, tax), but subject to increasing discredit, instability and an emerging fightback from the mass movement. We are not seeing a generalized “Bolsonorization” of the region, the turn to the right is advancing but on unstable ground and we have not yet seen a strategic defeat of the popular classes.

Globally, the ruling classes have the initiative, but they have failed to establish a new hegemony or stabilize a new relationship of forces between the classes. Even in this defensive context for the popular classes (or a reactionary context in the case of Brazil), the capitalist offensive is slowed down by social resistance, and although legal and media persecution and repression of social struggles is increasing, it has not been possible up to now to stabilize new authoritarian political regimes (the Colombian militarized state has a long history). The policies of the rightist governments are advancing, but they are gradually losing their mass base and face recurring situations of social mobilization or electoral setbacks, although without the emergence of an alternative political and social bloc. We could define the regional situation as “hegemonic instability”, to use an expression of Poulantzas.

The 1930s in slow motion?

In the 1990s, Tony Cliff said that a stage had been opened that could be defined as “the 1930s in slow motion”. The formula had many limitations. Fundamentally, he ignored the meaning of the cycle that opened with the capitalist restoration in the East and the neoliberal offensive, that is, a historic defeat that would remove for a long period the idea of a socially viable alternative to capitalism. One could hardly speak of a revolutionary threat on the part of the working class, such as the one that characterized the political polarization of the 1930s.

However, if we take into account the tendency, typical of historical analogies, to highlight similarities more than differences, we can see that, despite everything, the formula contains a moment of truth. In the wake of a new historical crisis of capitalism we witness the slow eclipse of a world. At a pace less accelerated than that of the 1930s, we see a certain political-social equilibrium slowly eroding, with its political representations, its ideological conceptions and its culture. In the space left by the decline of traditional parties, which have managed capitalism since the post-war period, new political phenomena emerge, many of them unwholesome. Despite the new social struggles, the spiral of defeats of the working class has not been broken, so that the relationship of social and political forces tends to favour the far right as a way out of social unrest.

Capitalism has evolved after all its major crises (1873, 1930, 1973). Each time it was a profound transformation, affecting not only the exclusively economic terrain but also the articulation of the entire capitalist system, involving changes in the political, institutional and ideological field. We do not know what world we will find at the end of the current transition, but for the moment we can see that authoritarian state reinforcement is one of the great contemporary trends. Trump's US, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Putin's Russia, "liberal-Stalinist" China, the growth of the extreme right in Western Europe (the "cradle of social democracy"), Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, are all examples of a world that becomes more hostile by the day. Towards the end of the 1970s, Marxist authors such as Poulantzas announced the consolidation of an "authoritarian statism" as the normal form of government of capitalism. However, ascendant neoliberalism could be articulated with consensual forms of political domination and appropriated entirely the "floating signifier" of democracy. Before the fall of the Berlin wall and the disarticulation of the "socialist camp", a triumphant capitalism closed the "century of extremes" and proclaimed victory in the long-running dispute between "democracy and totalitarianism". The marriage of the market economy and liberal democracy was then presented as the "end of history". Now, at the time of the hegemonic crisis of neoliberal capitalism, the hegemonic chain between democracy and neoliberalism is broken and a progressive tightening of the coercive factor of political domination is developing.

There is also another, more worrying (frightening), option. That the authoritarian involution does not only rest on the need of the ruling classes to strengthen the coercive factor in a context of crisis of hegemony but is also the result of a "pressure from below". It would not be a mere radicalization of the traditional right, which is imposed by the lack of alternatives and the demoralization of the left and the oppressed, but the extreme right managing to capitalize and tune into popular discontent. In other words, since neoliberal capitalism has generalized a social environment of insecurity, employment instability and commercial anomie, the desire for "order" begins to be a "popular demand". It would not be, in this case, only the emergence of an authoritarian individualism, the sinister shadow of traditional liberalism, which carries its desire for "respect for property and the individual" to punitive consequences, but an authoritarian turn expressing a "desire for community" and collective protection of the popular classes against the unleashed impersonal forces of the market. In this second case, the new authoritarian right would have greater potential to build hegemony.

Argentina, Brazil and the new Latin American right

The rise of Bolsonaro to the government of the Latin American giant imposes the return of the debate on fascism. Are we effectively facing a contemporary form of fascism? We must remain rigorous and not use the term lightly. It is not a synonym for "authoritarian capitalism" or an appropriate qualifier for any military dictatorship or repressive Bonapartism. On the one hand, it is clear that none of the current phenomena of the extreme right are a simple repetition of historical fascism. But to say that no historical experience is the same as another is a triviality. It is, in any case, about knowing if the phenomena of the 1930s offer useful references in thinking about the current world, where we see all kinds of authoritarian experiences reborn.

In my opinion, fascism differs from other reactionary and authoritarian movements in that it is dressed in the clothing of rebellion (against politicians, finance, elites and so on) and this allows it to capitalize on popular frustrations of different types in a programme that fuses "liberation" with authoritarianism. This is the core of the contradictory, enigmatic and peculiar nature of fascism. It is a movement that seeks to institutionalize methods of civil war against the working class, the left and democratic rights driven by a great reactionary mass mobilization. George L. Mosse defines it as a "bourgeois anti-bourgeois revolution", Togliatti as a "reactionary mass regime", Enzo Traverso as a "revolution against the revolution". All definitions attempt to capture the same paradoxical nucleus. [\[1\]](#)

Is a new social authoritarianism emerging in Latin America? Are we witnessing the emergence of a far right

phenomenon with mass weight of which the Brazilian government is only the clearest expression? What is its relationship with the preceding “progressive cycle”?

An explanation of the backward movement of “progressivism” that associates its redistributive measures with the emergence of a hostile social subject resulting from these same policies is very widespread. These governments, having taken social layers out of poverty, have allegedly built a new middle class that had access to consumption and is loaded with the aspirational dimensions typical of traditional middle sectors which are politically represented on the right. Latin American governments have made their own gravedigger, the same people who benefited from their policies. A tragic account of these experiences is thus built, where all radicalism is functional to reaction and every popular policy builds a hostile social subject. This “iron cage” of possibilism is the favourite account of those who believe that progressive governments went further than their societies wanted and thus were exposed faced with conservative reaction.

This explanation should be able to pass the test of contrast with the classic experiences of “class engagement” of the 1940s and 1950s (Varguism, Peronism and so on). They were also characterized by a more intense generalization of popular consumption, but it is incontestable that in that case they allowed the consolidation of these governments as lasting popular identities (Peronism, paradigmatically) instead of producing their decline. We have to look more closely at this question.

Kirchnerismo made access to higher levels of private consumption the way of carrying out its lukewarmly redistributive policies and did not involve the mass movement as active social subjects, instead making the population a passive beneficiary of vertical policies emanating from the state. It was normal, then, that this political component be obscured and self-adjudicated exclusively to personal private effort. This obscuration could then be radicalized into a “meritocratic individualist” conception hostile to the politicization of social needs and the intervention of the state, which Macrismo attempted to gather and stimulate.

However, empirical studies (or simple demographic analysis of the vote) show that the social layers most hostile to progressive governments were not the direct beneficiaries of their policies, but rather the “relative disadvantaged”, those who were less benefited than other socially more impoverished sectors, and who felt their cultural status had been injured by this “pairing” (at times more imaginary than real). Here there appears what the Argentine political scientist Juan Carlos Torre calls “the political corollaries of social fragmentation, the prejudices of the lower middle classes against the poorest sectors. As sociology tells us when it emphasizes that the use of stigmas is likelier the closer the populations are to social or cultural contrast, and as the testimonies of anthropologists and journalists tell us, in the neighbourhoods of the lower middle classes the vision of the poor as “lazy” and “living off the state”, and whose very close presence is a source of insecurity is widespread.” [2] The formal working class, then, shows tendencies to reject welfare, immigration and to be more inclined to legitimize repressive policies and rigid hierarchies. In a way, a good part of this social sector acts politically and perceives itself symbolically, in rejection of the most impoverished sectors dependent on the informal economy and state assistance, in a similar way to the old middle class of the era of the nascent Peronist working class.

Kirchnerismo produced a broad welfare network that brought a broad social sector out of extreme poverty, without generating, in exchange, a new threshold of employment rights for the formal working class (as opposed to historical Peronism), beyond a gradual recovery in wages after the economic depression of 2001. This aspect ended up expressing itself in the conflict between the majority sectors of trade unionism and the last CFK government over the so-called “income tax” (actually a tax on the relatively high wages of a sector of the working class). These sectors felt their personal effort parasitized by an ineffective and corrupt state and in return they considered that this money was drained to social plans for the most pauperized sectors (the “lazy living off the state”). A new reactionary mythology, strongly stimulated by the media, was generalized within this growing “social right”: poor women get pregnant to collect social allowances for children, the poor live off the state without working, the state drains the resources extracted from the “productive Argentina” towards corruption and clientelism. Each of them meant putting an

exasperated negative load on a popular law and turning criticism of a government into a questioning of elementary democratic values.

To the extent that *Kirchnerismo* developed friction with the ruling classes from 2008 onwards, a right-wing politicization of a mass sector was developed in the heat of the “anti-populist” mobilizations (2008, 2012, 2014), mainly based on the middle classes, but also layers of the formal working class described above (although to a lesser extent). Unlike what happened in 2001, when the middle classes staged huge “anti-neoliberal” popular mobilizations and turned mostly to the left, the current electoral failure of Macrismo does not break the previous political loyalties and world views of its social base. That is to say, even if Macrismo is about to be evicted from government, the base of Macrismo will not be adequately defeated, where rejection of the politicization of social needs, the positive view of the market as a resource allocator (“the crisis is working”) and the demand for order and repressive intervention against crime and social protest are combined. A mirror reaction, slow in developing and still in the minority, to the “2001 cycle”: that is, to the centrality of “politics” (and the state) as a solution to social demands, the quasi-permanent presence of street mobilization, the limitation of the coercive factor in response to social protest and a (moderately) progressive government as a state representation of this cycle. That said, a mass base for future alternatives or political realignments remains available.

In Brazil, the relationship of forces is substantially worse but there are very significant symmetries. According to a recent text by Perry Anderson, the drastic reduction in poverty that Lula produced managed to turn a social mass that previously barely survived in the informal economy into a PT electoral stronghold. “Millions had been lifted from acute hardship and knew to whom they owed it. But, egged on by interested journalists and the ideology of the time, the regime took to boasting of its achievement as the creation of a ‘new middle class’ in Brazil, when the social promotion of most of those affected was not only more modest – formal jobs and higher minimum wages raising them to something like the position of a new working class – but more precarious. Politically... the official propaganda boomeranged: its effect was to invite identification with the consumerist individualism of the actual middle class, rather than with the existing working class.” [3] This popular sector was raising its social aspirations and felt very badly hit when the economy entered into recession. The frustration was particularly felt among young people who had benefited from previous policies and especially from the extension of higher education. Here was one of the sources of the new young right wing that emerged little by little from the mobilizations of 2013.

However, the fundamental change was happening in the “true middle class”. Anderson continues: “Big business, the working class and the poor had all benefited from PT rule. Professionals, middle management, service personnel and small employers had not. Their incomes had increased proportionately less than those of the poor and their status had been eroded by new forms of popular consumption and social mobility.” [4] It was in this social sector that the bulk of the popular reaction to petismo was based and that is why Haddad's electoral support remained very strong in the poor northeast of the country.

Bolsonarismo responds to the experience of the middle sectors and the petty bourgeoisie during the PT governments and the economic crisis and social deterioration of recent years. “The anti-petismo of the last five years – says Valerio Arcary – is a Brazilian form of the anti-leftism, anti-egalitarianism or anti-communism of the thirties. It was not a bet by the main nucleus of the bourgeoisie against the danger of a revolution in Brazil... His candidacy is an expression of a reactionary mass movement of the middle class, supported by minority fractions of the bourgeoisie, in the face of the economic recession of the last four years.” [5]

To this authoritarian radicalization of the petty bourgeoisie, we must add the social influence of evangelism (22% of the population) which, responding to the “wishes of community” in the most pauperized sectors of the population, has advanced significantly within popular religiosity and accumulated a remarkable political power in Brazil (they had already placed the vice president during Lula's two terms, José Alencar).

In a very general sense, we see that the emergence of a far-right phenomenon in Latin America is a response to the “progressive cycle”. Not only to their governments (more radical in some cases, more social-liberal in others) but to the political dynamics that began with the popular uprisings of the beginning of the century and their political and social reverberations that imposed limits on the offensive of the dominant classes. The cases of Argentina and Brazil would find rapid parallels in the petty bourgeoisie in Venezuela or in the eastern crescent of Bolivia, where fascist components are evident. Although the popularity of AMLO is still very strong and the right appears disjointed, some initiatives stuttering into life foretell the possibility of such a phenomenon also in Mexico, although the “progressive” dynamic is just beginning, and it is premature to make certain forecasts.

However, care must be taken in comparing the authoritarian reaction to “Latin American populism” with interwar Communism. Not only because the revolutionary threat against which historical fascism reacts is absent in the “progressive cycle”, with the partial exceptions of Venezuela and Bolivia. But because the country where a government with semi-fascist characteristics such as Bolsonaro’s is currently advancing is precisely where the working class was already more defensive and where the “populist threat” was clearer and domesticated. The discrediting of the PT before the impeachment was broad enough to make very likely defeat in a future “normal” election. It is necessary to avoid, then, the instrumentalist excess of supposing that fascism is simply the bourgeois response to a crisis situation.

A rigorous balance sheet of Latin American “progressivism” is crucial for the next period, incorporating the bleak image of the current authoritarian right-wing reaction. For years, the PT model was referenced by #moderate lefts of different types, contrasting the slow advances and broad alliances of Lulismo with the radicalism of the failed experience of the Chilean Popular Unity or the Bolivarian process that developed in parallel. However, a quick look at the Latin American geopolitical landscape shows a relevant trend for our strategic debates: the radical experiences of Venezuela and Bolivia, despite having faced the most aggressive hostilities (military coups, separatist attempts, interventional manoeuvres) are the ones that achieve the greatest sustainability and penetration in the popular classes. The herbivorous left of Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Honduras or Paraguay, which fantasized about the strength of its moderation, its broad alliances and its conciliatory policy with the bourgeoisie, quickly showed its remarkable weakness confronted with the pressures of the dominant classes.

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[1] For a better development of the characterization of the “Bolsonaro phenomenon” and current debates on fascism see my text [“Al borde del abismo: Bolsonaro y el retorno del fascismo”](#).

[2] Torre, Juan Carlos, [“Los huérfanos de la política de partidos revisited”](#).

[3] *London Review of Books*, 7 February 2019 [“Bolsonaro’s Brazil”](#).

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Arcary, Valerio [“¿Bolsonaro es o no un neofascista?”](#).