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Can the Latin American Progressive Governments Outlive Their Success?

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Can the Latin American Progressive Governments Outlive Their Success?²

Oliver Stone's *South of the border* (2009) portrays the quintessential narrative of the Latin American progressive cycle.³ The documentary tells the story of the coming to power of Chavez in Venezuela, the first in a new harvest of pink leaders that distanced themselves from the monochromatic post-communist neoliberal order. Surrounded by an overwhelming support from the popular classes and the nationalist left, Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador, the Kirchners in Argentina, and Lula in Brazil confronted openly the elites, the press monopolies, the right-wing destituent force, and in doing so, detached themselves from the governmentality that intensified inequality and poverty in the neoliberal 1990s.

In a sense this film is constructed as an inverse road movie: that is, instead of filming the popular protests throughout its different territories, Stone strolls through presidential palaces adhering to the epic discourse of the chiefs of State. *South of the border* even goes as far as citing the fall of the Berlin Wall, stating that the new Latin American political cycle erupted against the triumphalist post-historical ideology of the Washington consensus. In this narrative made for exportation, the progressive

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² This article was translated by Gerardo Muñoz. It was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2016/5/12/can-the-latin-american-progressive-governments-outlive-their-success> on May 12th, 2016.

³ *South of the border*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Good Apple Productions 2006.

cycle coincides with the Left's nostalgia for the Cold War, anxious in finding an "exteriority" to the global hegemony of capital.

The year 2015 was the *annus horribilis* of the Latin American progressive cycle. This was the year in which governments were defeated on their own terms, that is, through massive electoral participation that included the poor popular sectors. For instance, kirchnerismo could only offer as presidential nominee a candidate whose political career was shaped during Menemismo.⁴ In Venezuela, the opposition allocated 16% of the votes in the National Assembly elections.⁵ Evo Morales' young contender Soledad Chapetón became the mayor of El Alto, the second major city in Bolivia and the well-known plebeian heart and soul of the Gas Wars of 2003.⁶ Right after the multifaceted uprisings last June that led to the intensification of the political crisis, Rafael Correa admitted that he will not be running for the upcoming presidential elections of 2017.⁷ Finally, Dilma Rousseff, Lula's successor, faced massive protests in 2011 of almost a million discontented citizens. Cross-electoral polls have rated her popularity below the 10% support line.⁸ Although Dilma won the presidential election in October of 2014, it was by a very thin margin (3%) in which two things were proved, although the second was later proven false: 1. That Brazil was at the border of a deep systemic crisis, and 2. That she would not adopt neoliberal policies of fiscal adjustment, which were integrally inscribed in the 2015 political agenda.⁹

⁴ Salvador Schavelzon. "El agotamiento kirchnerista", http://www.la-razon.com/.../agotamiento-kirchnerista_o_238956...

⁵ Pablo Stefanoni. "Venezuela: el ocaso de los ídolos", <http://lalineadefuego.info/.../venezuela-el-ocaso-de-los-ido.../>

⁶ Pablo Stefanoni. "La nueva derecha andina", <http://www.revistaanfibia.com/cron.../la-nueva-derecha-andina/>

⁷ Bruno N. Dias. "Junho no Equador e o correísmo", <http://uninomade.net/tenda/junho-no-equador-e-o-correismo/>

⁸ On the 2015 protest in Brazil, see Giuseppe Cocco's interview at IHU: <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/.../541110-as-manifestacoes-de-mar...>

⁹ Bruno Cava. "The coup in Brazil has already happened", <https://www.opendemocracy.net/.../coup-in-brazil-has-already-...>

It is in this context that the discourse on the exhaustion of the progressive cycle begins to take shape.¹⁰ At the same time, understanding it as a narrative of “closure” is insufficient and full of traps, since it seems to point to a defeat of what previously was a golden age of progressive usurpation of power. According to this faulty narrative, the downfall of these governments was instigated by financial markets deregulation, right wing *golpismo*, and elite alliance with U.S imperialism. In all the cases the explanation is externalized and mystified to an “other” that determines the defeat that we have the duty to mourn.

This self-critique is best expressed by the view that the majority of those who benefitted from the social beliefs did so to then turn in favor of the ideology of consumerism, voting the political opposition (in terms of a populism logic, this is translated as the people are always right except when they do not vote us), and lamenting for not being “socialist enough”. But in reality before the omen of the end of the progressive cycle became a bitter reality in the Argentine case and is beginning to be bitter without end in the Brazilian scene, it is necessary to take distance from any epic narrative structured around the opposition between imperialism and anti-imperialism, progressives and neoliberalists, left and right; all categories that only had some theoretical validity in the 1970s, or perhaps with more analytical justifications in the 1990s. There should not be more mystification by adopting the grand narratives of the state. Instead we should confront the problems as they open a path towards action and thought. As I argued with Alexandre Mendes, the progressive governments *have won*.¹¹ This entails that they have secured legitimacy by systematically repressing emergent constituent possibilities against new political

¹⁰ For instance, see Raúl Zibechi: <http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a220180.html>; Gerardo Muñoz: <https://infrapolitica.wordpress.com/.../notas-sobre-el-agota.../>; Salvador Schavelzon: <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/.../27148-fin-del-relato-pr...>

¹¹ Bruno Cava & Alexandre F. Mendes. “A esquerda vence”, *Revista Lugar Comum* n.º 45, <http://uninomade.net/lugarcomum/45/>

imaginations that did not fit the prefigured ideological governmental mode of development and social organization of urban centers.

In the last ten to fifteen years, the politico-economic project of the region was grounded in a theoretical matrix of production in the context of underdevelopment that dates back to the age-old CEPAL model (Prebisch, Furtado), in spite of new syncretic adjustments.¹² In broad terms, this means an application of Keynesianism in *longue durée*: on the one hand, accepting that investment determines effective demands (one does not produce to distribute, but the other way around); and on the other, that in peripheral conditions it is imperative to govern over industrial and technological developments. From these premises one fundamental consequence is derived: accumulation leads to a general process of industrialization.

The logic of investments in the industrial sector will expand productive capacities, altering the specific composition of imports, and thus leading to a diversification of the economy. However, since the relation between center and periphery is structural, the only viable option for Latin American governments is to use their fiscal surplus of its initial position. It is here that the well-known “Commodities Consensus” springs up (Svampa 2013). In other words, the export index becomes the strategic element of capitalist accumulation as the point of departure for the productive model. In theory, the developmentalist project should enhance the national market relative to the external demand, promoting a deep transformation of the national economy, thus possibly breaking away with the vicious circle of structural dependency. In other words, industrialization and State planning is the path for overcoming levels of poverty.

Before the end of the progressive cycle, in fact, most of the criticisms against these governments stemmed from two main positions. First, those that point out that these governments were not sufficiently developmentalist, making it impossible to break away from neoliberalism, and an external alliance with financial forces hindering any real potential for emancipation. This line of argumentation is followed by the

¹² Antonio Negri & Giuseppe Cocco. “Globo(AL), biopoder e lutas em uma América Latina globalizada”, Record, 2005.

criticism, exemplified in the Venezuelan case, of not diversifying the national economy beyond the nonproductive matrix of petro-industry. In the Brazilian case, the criticism is organized against what is taken to be a “primary form of economy”, even if agro-business is also a large scale industry, intertwined to bio-engineering, financial, brand and commercial sectors. The second type of critique limits itself to the denunciation of extractivist excesses, as if the developmentalist project was grounded in an efficient direction, but only lacking an ethical dimension to impacted communities and more care for environmental policies. Both the industrialist critiques (1st position) and the social-liberal (2nd position) lose sight of a central internal limit to the progressive developmentalist model, to which I will return in the latter part of the essay.¹³

Across the board, the progressive governments emerged from democratic mobilizations from below. Chavez’ Bolivarian Revolution emerged out of the Caracazo (1989); Ecuador’s Citizen Revolution from the urban riots (1997-2001) and the “forajidos” rebellion(2005); Bolivia’s democratic and cultural revolution was a result of the insurgent cycle of 2000-2005 along with the Water and Gas wars in 2000 and 2003.¹⁴ In the cases of Brazil and Argentina, the 1997 Asian crisis catalyzed the crumbling of neoliberal stability leading to the 2001 crisis in Argentina, whose social protagonists were *piqueteros* and *cacerolazos* before Kirchnerismo – while the ascension of Lula to power came from three different electoral defeats (1989, 1994,

¹³ The liberal critique based on rights is a “weak” first level critique against developmentalism. A second-degree critique is also “weak”, since it substitutes the juridical limit by a qualitative one that meshes the anthropic principle of Malthusian thought with mathematic determinations. Some contemporary thinkers of capitalism, such as geographer David Harvey, regularly argue that capital is limitless and of infinite expansion. According to Marx, however, the limit of capital is class, and class power. The fragments on the machines in the *Grundrisse*, Marx’s most eschatological text, have the merit of placing a limit of the extensive to the intensive via-a-vis the machination of the social. This would a strong third degree critique related to the production of subjectivity. The idea of catastrophe can be disputed as capitalism’s own catastrophe at the moment of its maximum antagonism. From the South, this immanent analysis of developmentalism becomes contaminated with materials from the alter-developmental matrix, as developed by Alberto Acosta and Salvador Schavelzon. In this sense, instead of being determined by the outside by capital’s transcendental will, one could also think of resistance as the transformation of subjectivity in its becoming. In this sense, one could turn the logic of developmentalism by becoming-Indian of developmentalism as I argue in “Devir-indio, devir-pobre”, <http://www.quadradosloucos.com.br/.../devir-pobre-deva-in.../>). Deleuze and Guattari in the *Anti-Oedipus* deploy the concept Body-without-organs (BwO) as the figure of the catastrophe.

¹⁴ Alexandre Mendes & Bruno Cava. “O Podemos e os enigmas que vêm do sul”, <http://www.diplomatique.org.br/artigo.php?id=1870>

and 1998). It is important to emphasize, however, that the convergence of these revolts with alter-globalization movements in Seattle and Genova (articulated in the horizon of Chiapas) allowed for a mestizaje of the autonomist generation of the 1990s with the more traditional Latin-American left of the seventies. An example of this encounter was the organization of the Global Social Forums (FSM) that took place in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul governed by Lula's PT.

The democratic mobilizations conveyed a much-needed drift in governmental policies at a moment when the developmentalist model began to directly invest in the social sphere. The reallocation of public budget determined an unseen liberation of manual labor which reinvented the economy from below, promoted a period of economic growth that reduced social and regional inequalities. All of the socio-economic indexes show the success of these social policies that, without the State and market mediations, transferred rent thus increasing the salary ceiling and expanding popular credit (WB Group, 2014). The impact of this transformation was felt at multiple levels, but there is no doubt that it sparked a profound change in most of Latin-American societies. There is a generalized interpretation of the success of the progressive cycle that points to the export indexes in connection to the expansion of the Chinese economy and the international commodities (like oil, which rose to a peak \$100 a barrel) as the central key to the economic contention during the economic crisis of 2008-2009 without giving up the operation of redistribution. What seems to be left out from this analysis is the possibility of considering that the strengthening of the internal market was conditioned to the relative transformation of the social productive forces and the formation of virtuous economic circuits (regardless of the industrial success or limitations), as well as to the overall tendency towards autonomous exports.

The developmentalist principles adopted by the progressive governments were formulated before the decline of the Keynesian Fordist model of the seventies and the arrival of financial globalization. In this way, industrialization is understood as the path opening towards emancipation, whether it is through proletarianization with class consciousness, or through the "base reforms" (Furtado 1976) in a more diachronic analysis. Also, the developmentalist success of the Brazilian dictatorship

(1964-85), through the 2nd National Plan of Development (PND), drove to a conclusion the “iron cycle” coinciding with the moment of the silicon revolution that began in California. After three decades, the productive sector no longer coincided with the industrial sector, since the developmentalist projects continue being measured through indexes that no longer account for the overdetermination of the “capital of communism” that drives financialized forms.¹⁵ The attempt to isolate the working sector through investment indexes became a mirrored image, leading to a parallel accumulation of capital in the hands of the traditional oligarchic elites that should have been the target of their antagonism in the first place.

In any case, it is important to emphasize the singularity of both Bolivian and Ecuadorian constituent political processes that forced mobilizations at the margins of developmentalist agendas, such as the plurinational construction based on “Buen Vivir”,¹⁶ or Correa’s techno-populism based on the economy of knowledge that copied not so much the Cuban model as it did the South Korean.¹⁷ In spite of these designs, the respective cases of TIPNIS and Yasuni-ITT signaled the resolution of tensions and contradictions within the rich Andean political experiences, impacting the developmentalist project as well as the dynamic between governments and the social movements. The complex biopolitical practices of autonomy and the common became reduced to a social-progressive horizon, as Alberto Acosta and Salvador Schavelzon have argued.¹⁸ No two other statesmen express the primacy of this necessity better than Rafael Correa and Vice-president Álvaro García Linera, who

¹⁵ Andrea Fumagalli & Sandro Mezzadra. “A crise da economia global”, Record, 2011. See also *KorpoBraz* (2013) by Giuseppe Cocco.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive study of the notion of “Buen Vivir” in Bolivia and Ecuador, see *Plurinacionalidad y Vivir Bien/Buen Vivir: dos conceptos leídos desde Bolivia y Ecuador post-constituyentes* (CLACSO, 2015) by Salvador Schavelzon.

¹⁷ Pablo Stefanoni. “La utopía coreana en los Andes”, <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=171279> and Carlos de la Torre’s “El tecnopopulismo de Rafael Correa: ¿Es compatible el carisma con la tecnocracia?”, <https://muse.jhu.edu/login...>

¹⁸ Alberto Acosta. “O Buen Vivir, uma Oportunidade de Imaginar Outro Mundo”, br.boell.org/sit.../default/files/downloads/alberto_acosta.pdf

have repeatedly affirmed the necessity of the developmentalist project as the condition for the State's struggle to eradicate poverty.¹⁹ In the rhetoric of García Linera's, the quintessential intellectual of the progressive cycle, one could read the internal limit of developmentalism from the left.²⁰

There is a lot of discussion on inequality, but not much about exploitation.²¹ Capital is understood not as social relation that organizes the very relations between society and state. Rather, the question of capital appears, inversely, as an organizing principle from both outside and above, a master trope that the state will oppose in a molar tension in the social division of wealth. It is no coincidence that the recent mobilizations are classified as wanting to destabilize the state in the name of restoring neoliberalism. This happened in the uprisings of 2013 in Brazil – in some respects, a far echo of the Argentine *¡Que se vayan todos!*²² – coinciding with the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011,²³ and Venezuela in 2014 and those in Ecuador in 2015.²⁴ All of these uprisings were delegitimized by the progressive governments, and re-coded as “vandalism” in Brazil, as “coup” in Venezuela, or as “terrorism” in Ecuador. The state's discourse, moreover, contributed to institutional atrophy pointing to the radical democratization in a “national-state” matrix,²⁵ undermining its potential for political renovation. This was a common pattern across the region in terms of dealing with social movements in each occurrence of protest.

¹⁹ Álvaro García Linera. “Empate catastrófico y punto de bifurcación”, <http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/.../se.../CyE/cye2Sta.pdf>

²⁰ Álvaro García Linera. “O socialismo é a radicalização da democracia”, interview with, <http://www.cartamaior.com.br/...> (2015)

²¹ I follow here the insight developed Giuseppe Cocco in the above-cited interview.

²² Ariel Pennisi. “Imagens e anacronismos; a questão do demos entre o 2001 argentino e o 2013 brasileiro”, *Revista Lugar Comum* n.º 45, <http://uninomade.net/lugarcomum/45/>.

²³ Alexandre Mendes. A good summary could read in “Ocupações estudantis: novas assembleias constituintes diante da crise?”, <http://uninomade.net/.../ocupacoes-estudantis-novas-assemble.../>

²⁴ Pablo Ospinta Peralta. “¿Por qué protestan en Ecuador?” <http://nuso.org/articulo/por-que-protestan-en-ecuador/>

²⁵ Pablo Stefanoni. “Chavismo, Guerra Fría y visiones ‘campistas’”. <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=165376>

We are dealing with a Leftist mixture of Hegelianism and Marxism, where the state appears as the privileged dialectical synthesis that justifies every phenomena through “correlations of forces”. But this is yet another name for the Hegelian equation, “the Real equals the Rational”. This could be transferred to the international scene, where a new dialectic between economy and the world becomes the BRICs synthesis as the international counter-power to North American imperialism. A version of this dichotomy was already in place in Montesquieu’s thought in the account of *checks and balances*.²⁶ The sympathy for the Chinese model is not only nostalgia for the Cold War division, but more importantly a new developmentalist economic matrix. The restoration of the Washington consensus gets rewritten as the Beijing consensus.²⁷ An explicit contradiction hides the all too familiar fluxes through a unifying principle as the one proposed by Deng in 1976: “planning and market forces are two forms that control economic activity”.²⁸ Since dialectics accepts anything, even waving red flags and aligning with the socialist party (as in the Brazilian case), it could govern along with national oligarchies and the corporate class. One cannot govern with Kátia Abreu, the agribusiness queen, and at the same time defend developmentalism as you were Rosa Luxemburg. Only Hegelians can accomplish this impossible task.

The difference between speaking about inequality and thinking exploitation is that, in the case of the latter, what is emphasized is the social constitution embedded in exploitation, and consequently its antagonistic character. To speak of inequality instead of exploitation allows thinking to occur in terms of social stratifications in a sociological frame instead of through the antagonism constitutive of social relations

²⁶ We could cite as example that the fundamental contradictions are central to the model of accumulation and the capitalist continuity. This process of deterritorialization of capitals is at the center of Giovanni Arrighi’s *Il lungo XX secolo: denaro, potere e le origini del nostro tempo* (1996).

²⁷ I am following here Giuseppe Cocco’s analysis of China and the BRICs. The economic matrix designed by Nelson Barbosa follows principles of the post-1976 Chinese model.

²⁸ Deng Xiaoping cited in John Gittings’ *The changing face of China: from Mao to Market*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

in capital. That is, the transformation of the social composition corresponds to the dissension of the social composition to a molecular form. There is little to lament, however, with the ideal of building a working class that will fit the European modalities of Fordist industrialism. The conditions for proletarianization in Latin America already entail an intrinsic post-Fordist form of proletarianization. As argued by Giuseppe Cocco, in this *sui generis* proletarianization the poor are excluded as poor.²⁹ Combating poverty has an ambiguous dimension in the official rhetoric that leans towards the domestication of the problem, instead of affirming its antagonistic potential. If the progressive cycle ideal of inclusion is the inclusion of the poor in terms of exploitation (and not only in quantitative terms of reducing inequality), then there exists a resistance dimension of the poor, a creative and productive dimension that exceeds the narrative of “State vs. Capital” duopoly.

The critics of the proletarianization of the South, focusing on the moral pattern fixed by consumer democratization,³⁰ or that of an anamorphic and disorganized sub-proletarian tend to exclude the transformations at the level of class.³¹ This has been expressed not only in the new cycle of struggles beyond the progressive horizon, to the extent of even voting slightly to the right-wing political forces. In order to capture this polarization from below internal to the crisis, Giuseppe Cocco and I proposed a *savage Lulism*,³² a potential block of singularities of the new mobilization phase of the poor that was repressed by the Left itself.³³ On the other side of mobilizations and constituent struggles, the conquests of the progressive cycle have systematically

²⁹ This is the axis of the *operaismo* conceptual analysis used by Cocco to understand the mobilization of the poor in the last fifteen years in Brazil. See his books *MundoBraz* (2009) y *KorpoBraz* (2013).

³⁰ For Emir Sader is the central struggle is the “battle of ideas” against neoliberal ideology. See his “Vencer a batalha das ideias”, <http://cartamaior.com.br/...>

³¹ André Singer, voicing the Leftist sector of the PT, has advanced the concept of the “sub-proletarian”, emerged during the Lula years. See “Os sentidos do lulismo: reforma gradual e pacto conservador” (2012).

³² Giuseppe Cocco & Bruno Cava. “Vogliamo tutto! Le giornate di giugno in Brasile: la costituzione selvaggia della moltitudine del lavoro metropolitano”, <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=173>

³³ Amarildo was the visible face of the 2013 Brazilian uprising, where the expression for organization of the poor, against the grain of biopolitical organization, was affirmed around those of color and indigenous submitted to the dominance of megaprojects of urban development. See “A luta pela paz”, by Giuseppe Cocco, Eduardo Baker and Bruno Cava, <http://www.diplomatique.org.br/artigo.php?id=1569>

worked miraculously, since it becomes a paranoid symbolic patrimony that must persist uncontested.

It is not enough to lament or contest the end of the progressive cycle, or even overemphasize the return of the “New Right” in a conjunction like ours that is traversed by multiple fluctuations, new social actors, and intensities.

A critique sustained on how the progressive cycle was not being socialist, developmentalist, or voluntarist *enough*, paving the way from the rise of liberal opponents (Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Henrique Capriles in Venezuela, or Mauricio Rodas in Ecuador) is insufficient. It is important to acknowledge that the progressive governments succeeded and because of this victory, ambiguous results are now emerging. The dynamics of mass mobilizations will reshape the developmentalist projects and explain what national criollo intellectuals cannot longer clarify. The task is to liberate the analysis from black and white epics or dialectical narratives, as to reopen political imagination to a new social and economic composition in the region. We can leave the process of mourning to a global left still haunted by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism. First, one must liberate oneself from an “impotent pseudo-heroism”.³⁴ All walls must fall in order to generate new experiences of action and thought.

**In writing this article, I want to highlight the important interlocutors outside of Brazil, such as Diego Sztulwark, Veronica Gago, Salvador Schavelzon, Santiago Arcos, Pablo Stefanoni, Ariel Pennisi, Bruno Napoli, Mauricio Villacrez, Pablo Hupert, Nicolás F. Muriano, Melisa Gorondy Novak, Bernardo Gutiérrez, Cesar Altamira, Gerardo Muñoz, Alberto Acosta, Oscar Camacho, and Nemo Niente.*

³⁴ *Lobo Suelto!* Editorial. “El país banal”, <http://anarquiacoronada.blogspot.com.br/.../11/o-pais-banal.h...>

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