

# Latin America in Times of Neoliberal Restoration: What should we do?

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## Abstract

This essay offers an interpretation of the Latin American political conjuncture of the last two or three years. On one hand, the conjuncture is characterized by what the analysts call the end of the progressive, national and popular cycle. On the other hand, the conjuncture is marked by the electoral rising of right-wing governments and parties; they are driving a restoration of the neoliberal project in the region. We present a contextualization of this double process and its main conflict dimensions, and we reflect from a

position of identification and critical accompaniment with the national, popular, progressive, Latin American project. We also reflect on the needs of the social movements, political parties and organic intellectuals of the Latin American left wings to assume, as a task, the dispute for the political and cultural hegemony vis-à-vis the project of reviving the neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** Latin American conjuncture, progressive governments, democracy, neoliberalism, cultural and political hegemony.

For more than half a century, Frank Tannenbaum—an American historian, intellectual, and researcher of our countries and their complex realities—drew the conclusion that the guiding threat of Latin America history was the permanent presence of the forms of authoritarian domination that



made democracy an exception. “Dictators and military regimes, palace revolutions, and coups d’état, violence and violent domination have always been a constant policy in the Latin American continent” (Tannenbaum, as quoted by Ansaldi, 2010, pp. 200-201), as used to say the author of *The Future of Democracy in Latin America* and of *Ten Keys to Latin America*, both books published in 1955 and 1962 respectively.

This democratic exceptionalism was sadly confirmed in the last three decades of the twentieth century. At that time, military dictatorships and civil governments, at the service of the American imperialism in the context of the Cold War, assumed the national security doctrines based on the theses of the *internal enemy* and the *communist danger*. They also implemented the tactics of the *dirty war* and *scorched-earth war* that caused thousands of fatalities and disappeared people, and a brutal weakening of the political institutions. Besides, the so-called *democratic transitions* several peoples entrusted prevented the democratic practices from being reduced to an electoral ritual with less influence on the course of our countries and the search for the common good of our societies.

In the 1990s, the ignominious decade of the neoliberalism and the *pensée unique* (single way of thinking), this democra-

cy was called *low intensity* (O’Donnell, 1993; Ansaldi, 2010): a few—political élites, transnational economic groups, technocrats and recycled politicians—decided the destiny of most people. There were no more alternatives than the dogmas of economic faith the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) proclaimed. And the American empire, now as the hegemon of the unipolar world, blessed and rejected the rulers of the moment.

It was at the end of the twentieth century, due to an unprecedented articulation of resistances of social movements, indigenous peoples, political parties, and emerging leaderships, that Latin America awoke and ended with the ritualistic inertia of the (neo)liberal democracy, which was antiquated and not able of meeting the people’s claims; a democracy at the measure of the oligarchies, the foreign capital, and the factors of power of the governance of the globalization. The political processes that opened the twenty-first century to hope and pushed the post-neoliberal reconfiguration broke out first in Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina; after, in Bolivia, Ecuador and some in Central American countries. Those processes also constituted an unquestionable democratic progress when broadening the material, discursive, and symbolic dimensions of the practices and meanings that the



democracy, persecuted and betrayed too many times, had acquired in the region.

The fights, advances, and victories acquired by national and popular governments, political parties, and popular organizations of the most different and plural expressions permitted successive defeats of the neoliberal right on its own ground—which was the bourgeois electoral democracy—and the American imperialism with its emblematic Pan-Americanist project of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA; *Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas*, ALCA, in Spanish). They also permitted the creation of conditions necessary to articulate a set of initiatives of regional integration; initiatives that are able to reactivate our unionist utopia, now in a new framework of sovereignty and self-determination, far away from the agendas imposed by the White House in Washington or by any IMF office.

In fact, epic were the days of popular resistance and diplomatic audacity at the Mar del Plata Summit in 2005. On the one hand, these days culminated in the derailment of the FTAA which planned to annex Latin America as a captive market of the American transnational companies. On the other hand, they also culminated with the emergence of the presidents Néstor Kirchner, Lula da Silva, and Hugo Chávez as leaders of con-

tinental reach, capable of implementing not only national projects—based on the recovery of the State, a strong social policy, the wealth redistribution, and the broadening of democracy—but also with consequences all over Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact, ever since the Pan-Americanist adventure failed, there were memorable meetings that permitted the construction of integration spaces—such as ALBA, UNASUR, and CELAC—and, in a broader sense, the forge of an our-American consensus (*consenso nuestroamericano*) that, in good measure, guided the insertion of our region to the new multipolar world (Cuevas y Mora, 2015). Perhaps the old, oligarchic, and capitalist domination has not been defeated yet, and maybe there is still a long way for this to happen. However, the fractures and wounds inflicted in the last fifteen years by a wide range of social and political forces involved in the search for alternatives to overcome the neoliberalism have not been minor.

### **The End of the Progressive Cycle and the Neoliberal Restoration: The Hour of the Wolf.**

Nevertheless, in the last years, the political Latin American panorama has been experiencing profound transformations that, for most analysts, converge on the end of the progressive or national-popular cycle and the rise of the neoliberal



restoration counteroffensive. Especially important have been the political conjunctures experienced from mid-2015 to 2016 in Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina, where the political attention of our America and the rest of the world has been brought to focus. No wonder: it was there where the peoples first defeated the neoliberalism at the turn of the century, thanks to the successive elections of the Presidents Hugo Chávez (1999), Lula da Silva (2002), and Néstor Kirchner (2003), respectively: they became the bastions of the process of the Latin American change. Currently, the convergence of objective and subjective factors has driven us to a point in which the reversion of the national-popular or progressive process of the region is no longer a hypothesis, but has become a reality: either by electoral way—as it is the case in Argentina and Venezuela—or by the coups d'état and their juridical variations—as it is the Brazilian case. These objective factors are the economic crisis of the global capitalism, the weakening of the public management, and the absence of renovative leaderships. The subjective ones are the emptying of the discourse on the change of epoch as a horizon of political action, and the relative ideological stagnation that is product of the inertia in the relations between the State, parties and social movements.

In fact, after a decade of Kirchner domination, Mauricio Macri recovered the Argentine neoliberal bastion—he was called the best student of the neoliberal model during the 1990s. In Venezuela, thanks to the tactics of economic war, media war, and the weakening of Nicolás Maduro's government, the so-called Committee of Democratic Unity (*Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* in Spanish) cornered the Bolivarian Revolution by taking the control of the Parliament, after 17 years of Chavista majority in the legislative branch. And in Brazil, in the darkness of pacts between the élites and through spurious processes, the coup-plotters carried out the impeachment trial to remove Dilma Rousseff from office.

When explaining the meaning of one of his most memorable films, Ingmar Bergman wrote that *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) was that moment “when sleep is deepest, when nightmares are most real. It is the hour when the sleepless are haunted by their deepest fear, when ghosts and demons are most powerful...” (cited by Vázquez, 2015, October 13). As in the Bergmann's classic movie, Latin America is living its own *hour of the wolf*: the transition from the post-neoliberal hope and dreams of liberation to the nightmares of the conservative neoliberal restoration. The case of Argentina is paradigmatic of the



times that are announced: the president Mauricio Macri formed a cabinet with ministers recruited from multinational companies (the *Chief Executive Officers*). The so-called *CEOcracy* was formed with former executive directors—among other positions. They passed from General Motors to Aerolíneas Argentinas board, from IBM and Telecom to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship, from the Argentine subsidiary of Shell to the Ministry of Mines and Energy, from LAN Argentina board to the Chief position of the Cabinet of Ministers, and from the Deutsche Bank to the Ministry of Finance. No less aggressive and controversial was the appointment of Patricia Bulrich as responsible for the Ministry of Security; she is believed to be connected to the CIA and to American right wing foundations (Zaiat, 2015, December 6).

In this scenario, through their counteroffensive of neoliberal restoration, the local right wings have launched a campaign to constrain the extent of democracy resignification, opened to the dispute and the collective construction by the national-popular and progressive processes. The script of this restoring strategy aims to force the institutional tension, the dispute between the republican powers, and the interference of external agents in the competence spheres of those powers in order to provoke a

rupture justifying actions of force and military interventions. The imperialism closely follows these attempts and conceives plans amid ambiguous diplomatic declarations and the co-optation of “opposing” political parties, government ministries or secretariats, and military commanders.

Unveiling possible causes having brought us to this decisive moment, as well as pointing out possible consequences, scenarios, and developments, is a matter of greatest interest for the Latin American critical intellectuals in all fields: governments, social movements, academia, mass media. From our perspective, beyond acknowledging the importance of objective factors in the life of our societies, and the influence that these factors inevitably have when determining the amount of leeway for those governments promoting post-neoliberal projects, the analysis should also consider what we perceive as losing the way of the common project of the future, which seems to have been diluting progressively, especially since the President Chavez’s death: none of the leaderships of the region could assume Chavez’s capacity of envisaging a project of regional reach — bolivarian — and of enunciating it from a positioning with an our-American (*nuestroamericano*) strong accent, which emotively involved and,



at the same time, mobilized to action and commitment to let his concretion become reality.

This discursive vacuum, which is also a strategic one, facilitated the local right wing and the imperialism to recover positions in the ideological field; thus, they positioned, in the public and mediatic sphere, the theses of the *end of the cycle*, of the permanent crisis, and, finally, of the inviability of the post-neoliberal direction. Because politics is also subjectivity, no doubts about this; it is constructing and searching for meanings, stories, and discourses defining individual and collective practices, forms of organization, and appropriation of the common and the public domain. It is just a cultural fight. Perhaps in this dimension currently lies our greatest weakness.

In his first official visit to Brazil as President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in May 1999, Hugo Chavez gave a speech at the auditorium of the Central Library of Brasilia. In that occasion, besides proposing the Bolivarianism as a pole for the Latin America integration and for our insertion to the multipolar world, he issued an admonition, which is still valid: "I think we are in a time of audacity, in times of offensive; not in times of defensive or retrograde movements. No; let us go forward with our flags, with our love and with our peoples" (Chavez, 2006, p. 6).

Despite the complicated panorama emerging in front of us, what is required is the will and the conscious action to continue advancing in the paths of utopias that illuminated the birth of the Latin American twenty-first century. It is also required the courage to face the dangers and challenges that will emerge on those routes. With the new century, the Latin American peoples dared to walk and were able to give a name to a common future project: the one of our dignified, sovereign, fair, popular and inclusive America. We must not forget those lessons, or give up the hope of other possible worlds that only we can build. If we lose the audacity and love in these times of a restoring offensive, as Chávez said, we will lose everything.

### What to Do? The Dispute for Political and Cultural Hegemony

For those of us who identify with the process of Latin American change the twenty-first century started, and assume a position of critical accompaniment from academia and the media, it is clear that our future is at a crossroad: either to get more engaged in the turn to the left and to construct a new hegemony, or to give up the political and cultural ground conquered in these years. The first option has different distinctive nuances, more revolutionary ones, and reformist the others; it has



allowed unprecedented advances in the history of the region, even in spite of the contradictions and errors that can be pointed out to each government. Instead, the second option means to relinquish the ground conquered in face of the restoring counteroffensive of the regional right and its proposal to return to the past: to the times of structural adjustments and domination of the IMF and the World Bank, to the dismantling of the state and privatization, to the submission to the dictates of the neoliberal globalization and the US imperial policy.

That is why it is not only Kirchnerismo, Chavismo or Petismo (the political projects of Nestor Kirchner, Hugo Chavez, and the Brazilian Workers' Party) that will lose or win in this decisive episode we have reached. What is at stake for all of us is the possibility of building post-neoliberal, popular, national, participatory, and socially just democracies. It is our possibility of being Latin Americans who do not renounce the utopia of emancipation and liberation. This is no time to blame for defeats or for engaging in sterile discussions. As Martí said, "it is the hour of recounting, and of the united march, and we must walk in close ranks, like the veins of silver at the roots of the Andes" (in Hart Dávalos, 2000, 203). What has been gained so far is unquestionable;

defending it is an ethical and historical imperative with our America and its future. Moreover, accompanying the people in this struggle is our choice.

In 1979, Pablo González Casanova published the first edition of a work that became a classic of the Latin American critical thinking: *Imperialism and Liberation. An Introduction to the Contemporary History of Latin America*. In his book, the Mexican intellectual argues that the great protagonist of the history of our region are the organized masses, the peoples in movement, in their persistent fight against the various forms of oppression and domination, pursuing the ideal of the liberation of the peoples, even in the midst of the harshest and most adverse circumstances that make this ideal an elusive but always necessary objective.

In light of the hegemonic history that gives the leading role to those who have the power, and particularly in light of the expansion of the capitalist system and of the American imperialism that seek to conquer Latin America without sparing efforts and stratagems, González Casanova (1991) vindicates that *other history* of "resistance and liberation struggles, in which the masses fight against being subdued or exploited, or for breaking the ties that tie them up" (p.11). It is a history of triumphs and defeats, of advances and setbacks, of



alliances and betrayals, in which “the quest for independence is brutally hampered or exploited by the oligarchies and bourgeoisies” (p.12) to impose their power. Definitely, it is the history of liberation of those who entered as “tribes, runaway slaves, peoples, masses of cities, artisan fraternities, parties, unions, peasant leagues, student associations, associations of tenants or users, organizations of popular power, *mob* and guerrilla groups, with leaders, heroes, and intellectuals of armed and unarmed letters.”(p.14)

The years have passed, but given the present circumstances we face, as well as the enormous threats and challenges that emerge in the conflictive relationship with the United States, the general interpretation of the future of our America González Casanova proposed is perhaps more valid than ever. The tension between imperialism and liberation once again puts in check the democracy that, perhaps still precarious and fragile, has been carved in our countries after the end of the military dictatorships of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The struggle for the construction of more just, more inclusive, and more democratic societies remains the great task of the peoples of our America. It has been a long and unremitting struggle for which, as the Second Declaration of Havana (1962)

stated, “the poor, the exploited, the vilified people have already died more than once.”

## So What Should We Do Now?

First, it is necessary to recognize that we are witnessing the end of a brilliant and, certainly, controversial era—that of the Bicentennial generation. But, it is also marked by unprecedented achievements in recent decades: in terms of human rights, democratic participation and a new constitutionalism, social policies, struggle against inequality and poverty, and regional integration, just to name a few. It would be better that we recognize it, just as a closing chapter, so that to begin to work on the reconstruction of the emancipatory path, as well as in the new resistances with which it will be necessary to face the neoliberal wave.

Likewise, considering the storm winds blowing over the Latin American political conjuncture of the last two years, which are certainly adverse to the national, popular, and progressive governments, we must take into account that discouragement, disenchantment, and skepticism are coming back again as a strong temptation for citizens, social organizations, parties, and not a few intellectuals. The media and think tank of the establishment do their part of the work by constructing a narrative



of the failure of the left and the unfeasibility of changes and transformations that try even to question the capitalism. Thus, the neoliberal common sense re-establishes itself as social, economic, political, and cultural regulation, and they slowly try to make us believe—as it was in the 1990s—that there is no other horizon than that of the realm of money freedom, the rights of the goods, the slavery of the people, and the inexorable inequality.

But, is it possible that these 15 years of victories over the right, of unprecedented revolutionary experiences—with their successes and mistakes—and search for development alternatives meant nothing? Can the achievements of this decade and a half be just erased from the collective memory and history of popular struggles?

We should not forget that the path that brought us to the *change of era* at the beginning of the twenty-first century was not easy. The Latin American peoples carried on their backs the burdens of an unfinished modernization (Domingues, 2009) and development models—promoted since the second half of the twentieth century—whose promise of well-being and prosperity failed on more than one occasion. This promise was sometimes betrayed by its own promoters, and sometimes

boycotted by the great powers, more interested in preserving the neocolonial conditions—on which its historical domination is based—than in the independence and autonomy of our America. *Barbarians and underdeveloped peoples* (Zea, 1992), we were cursed, and, with that fate, we were weaving the plot of our *combined, unequal and contradictory development*, as it was well characterized by intellectuals such as the Brazilian Jose Mauricio Domingues (2009) or the British David Harvey (2005 and 2014).

Condemned as we were, we dared to think for ourselves, and, in the 1960s and 1970s, we were able to build in Latin America a rich social, philosophical, political, and economic thought. The contributions of this thought allowed several generations to dispute both the cultural hegemony to capitalism and the dominant notions of development. The theory of dependence, the theology and the philosophy of liberation, and the pedagogy of the oppressed, to name a few examples, were banners of struggle in the front of ideas; while in other fronts, guerrilla groups and popular organizations fought against dictatorships and military apparatuses backed by US imperialism.

From that *total war*, whose outcome was the imposition of neoliberalism and the terrorism of State practically all over the



continent, and with the open wounds of its opprobrious social consequences—from the *Caracazo* (protests and riots in Caracas, Venezuela, in February 1989) to the Water War in Bolivia, and from the Zapatista uprising in 1994 to the 2001 Argentine crisis—Latin America was able to resist, reconstitute, and move on to the offensive. From the military defeat to successive electoral victories, and from the fragmentation of despair to great social mobilizations, the twenty-first century quickly emerged as a time of hegemonic dispute, of complex and diverse post-neoliberal practices. These practices allowed to rethink and to discuss the dogmas and assumptions of neoliberalism, and in a few cases, substantial progress was made in three key aspects. First, the representative and delegated democracy began to give way to direct and participatory democracy. Second, constitutional processes in several countries broke the domination of oligarchic power, and new constitutional designs—emerged from collective deliberation—try to respond to economic, political, social, environmental, and cultural challenges. Finally, the ideas of unity and deep Latin American integration renovate processes that tended to become more and more functional to the interests of capital and the United States (Cuevas and Mora, 2015).

Now more than ever, it is necessary to face the ideological offensive of the right wing, and to assume positions in the battle of ideas, in order to defend not a government or a particular president, but the right to be ourselves, to think and decide ourselves the course we want to follow in Latin America. The hegemonic dispute against neoliberalism is, then, far from being completed, and we cannot allow the reloaded story of the *end of history* to prevail as the unique voice that interprets and gives meaning to our-American time: a suffering time, but also an amazing one, that we have lived, and that we want to continue living.

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