

ARE THERE LEFT ALTERNATIVES? A DISCUSSION FROM LATIN AMERICA

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A DISORIENTED LEFT

Any discussion of the Latin American left and its capacity to bring about alternatives to the existing capitalist order should first address the ambiguity that surrounds the very term 'left'. From one point of view this is a positive thing, testimony to the fact that particular organizations, ideological affiliations or international policy options no longer enjoy a monopoly of 'the left'. At the same time, however, it suggests a need for some necessary clarification, so that it is clear what we are talking about. In this latter sense, in what follows I understand 'left' to simply refer to that broad range of collective actors (parties, fronts, alliances etc.) who consider themselves as belonging to that part of the political spectrum. This does not eliminate the ambiguity that surrounds the term left, but I hope it will provide a framework for this discussion.

In fact the objective situation of the Latin American left is itself ambiguous. It performs a relatively important role in the institutional political life in several countries (such as Brazil, Uruguay, El Salvador, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Mexico, Argentina), as recent elections have shown; yet it has still not been able to move beyond parliamentary minorities and control of some areas of local government—that is, areas of Latin American politics that have been traditionally weak in relation to the centralization of power in the executive. Despite the critique of strong presidential regimes that has been developed in some academic circles in the United States, and echoed by their colleagues south of the Rio Bravo,¹ it remains the case that the most important political decisions, in actual facts as well in legal provisions, are made by the executive.

It is clear, however, that this new configuration of the electoral map is leading the left to pay closer attention to institutional areas which it had regarded until recently as of only secondary importance. The expansion of the institutional horizons of the political left is taking place along with increasing involvement of social actors in local and sectorial issues. This coincidence of perspective could have a significant impact on the ability of

the left to create a solid electoral base. In any event, it has to be acknowledged that the left option is still much more notorious in the social sphere than within the framework of institutional politics. Left wing political parties are facing hardships in mobilising that majority of the electorate whose living standards are currently in steady decline. While recognising the electoral advances that have been made, it is also obvious that a large proportion of the electorate who belong to the popular classes and the petty bourgeoisie still do not see the left as an electoral option. In this sense the link between social dissatisfaction and electoral-preference has been broken.

The institutional involvement of left wing parties and political organizations has been accompanied by a smoothing in their programmes and proposals. The Latin American left has entered the electoral process with uneven results; however that involvement has not led to the formulation of political strategies offering alternatives to the current state of things. Their energies are devoted to criticising the prevailing macroeconomic order and the policies to implement it, and any proposals for change tend characteristically to be sectoral and local in their concerns. There are differences between one case and another, of course. In Argentina the Frente Grande – a political coalition gathering several progressive tendencies which left Carlos Menem's governing **Partido** Justicialista (PJ) due to the neoliberal policies being implemented – is placing the emphasis on exposing the corruption, fraud and authoritarianism of the political regime; demands for openness and public morality were central to its 1995 electoral campaign, while its critique of economic policy was not accompanied by any meaningful alternative proposal. In Venezuela, **Causa R** is in a similar position. The Brazilian Workers Party (PT) and the Frente Amplio in Uruguay, on the other hand, did show themselves willing and able to offer proposals rooted in an alternative socio-economic framework. In Mexico the **Partido** de la Revolution Democratica (PRD) has focussed on the question of democracy, but seems less forceful when it comes to economic strategy. In El Salvador, the FMLN is still involved in the specificities of the post-war setting – most of all, the full accomplishment of the peace accords; in Nicaragua, by contrast, the tension between the struggle to defend what remains of the revolutionary achievements of the past decade, and the consolidation of constitutional democracy, has produced a split in the FSLN. With very few exceptions, the Chilean left has opted to follow in the wake of Christian Democracy in administering a political system that still retains many of the features that date back to the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

So what proposals for global, structural change there are, are sporadic. The Latin American left appears motivated by the need to adapt to the new scenario emerging out of recent global and regional political changes – the

end of the cycle of the Central American revolutions, the crisis of Cuban socialism, the acceleration of global financial integration, the end of the cold war system – rather than by its overall transformation. In fact, the changes in that scenario are leading the left to modify its own ideological orientations, programmes, organizational structures and range of action.

This is an issue of central importance for the discussion of alternatives to the present neoliberal capitalist order and its negative impact on the perspectives for development and social progress in Latin America, and indeed the future of the democratic process itself. Political options do not arise in a vacuum; they are always proposed by collective actors claiming to represent the objectives, needs, interests and aspirations of given groups and social classes. A group of intellectuals may offer an alternative project that is technically viable and theoretically consistent, but it can only be politically effective when it is taken up by people. This does not in itself guarantee its viability, still less its success – but without it there is not even prospect of victory. And given that the relation between the intellectuals (in the Gramscian sense) and the popular classes is never direct or immediate, the discussion should also address the question of the organizational mediations that will translate the intellectual blueprint into a political proposal for social change.

To what extent or in what senses are we witnessing to a new situation, and to what extent or sense are we facing a renewal or updating of the dilemmas and conflicts that the Latin American left has been debating since its very beginnings? Are we facing something quite new, or rather the recomposition of a political scene which, notwithstanding what is new about it, seems very like the traditional panorama of Latin America? The next section will address these issues; section III will then consider the transformations of the socio-economic structure of Latin America and their impact on the redefinitions of the left. The third section examines some of the tensions that have arisen between the contents and achievements of the proposals of the left, and the institutional framework of representative democracy – the case of the EZLN in Chiapas providing a particularly graphic illustration of these tensions. Finally, section IV offers some thoughts on the spaces within the existing structures and institutions to which the left apparently has access. I would like to stress that the purpose of this piece is to identify a problematic, rather than to discuss all its contents and **projections.**²

I. RUPTURES AND CONTINUITIES

Any discussion of the current situation of the Latin American left involves, to a greater or lesser degree, an implicit comparison with the past. Whereas in previous times the left attempted to confront and eventually overcome

capitalism and build some sort of socialist alternative, today it merely tends to **graft sectoral** reforms, focusing more on neoliberalism as a particular variant of capitalism than on capitalism as an overall socioeconomic and political structure. So it seems appropriate to begin by considering whether all those projects which were presented or considered as alternatives to capitalism, were in fact alternatives – independently of their capacity to inspire great struggles or high levels of popular mobilisation.

It can be asserted without risking revisionism that most of Latin American left-wing organizations, parties, fronts etc, including the majority of those calling themselves socialist or communist, in fact stood for approaches and policies for reform, however wide-ranging the modifications they proposed? The characterization of these organizations and regimes as 'of a socialist orientation' arose out of the discourse of the protagonists themselves, from their positioning with regard to the international political conflict – their antagonism to the United States and their support of the Soviet Union – as well from the fear and ideological rigidity of their adversaries, as much as a reflection of the content of their projects for confronting, reforming or replacing the capitalist system. From the triumph of the Cuban Revolution onwards, the radicalism of anticapitalist perspectives tended to be assessed in relation to one specific type of political action – the armed struggle. Throughout the period of the Cold War, however, the focus and political assessments on domestic actors were severely overdetermined by the development of the bipolar **conflict**.⁴ A circumstance that confirms the peripheral character of Latin America in relation to the capitalist system, and the determining influence of its central actors over the processes and initiatives that develop in peripheral, **semi-sovereign** countries.

The profound political and socio-economic transformations demanded by the Central American revolutions – and which in the case of Nicaragua were carried out in the early years of Sandinismo – had a clearly popular, democratic and anti-imperialist character, but not necessarily an anti-capitalist **one**.⁵ This is not to diminish in any way the heroism of the revolutionaries nor the importance of these revolutions; but it does express clearly the correlations and coalitions of forces that have driven these processes forward. Even where some variant of socialism did figure in the initial revolutionary project, the intention became ensnared in the dynamics of subsequent political conflicts. In Cuba's case, the revolutionary design followed the inverse course; a revolution that initially presented itself as a popular and democratic movement for national liberation became socialist as a result of its very dynamics and of the decisions made by the revolutionaries in the context of their defensive confrontation with United States aggression. In other words, socialism was the result of a political practice articulated to a particular configuration of the **interna-**

tional system, rather than the result of a preexisting ideological **blueprint**.⁶ In turn, U.S intervention crushed Popular Unity in Chile (1970–73) and the New Jewel experiment in Grenada (1979–83) at such an early stage that we cannot offer anything more than general hypotheses on how these processes might have evolved.

Furthermore, from the late 1940s on, with a few and outstanding exceptions such as in Chile, Uruguay or Peru, Socialist and Communist parties have lost ground in Latin America's popular classes. The political identity and loyalty of rural and urban workers, as well as large sectors of the petty bourgeoisie, became tied to the parties and organizations of a populist, Social-Christian, or nationalist appeal, much more than to Marxist or Maxist-Leninist organizations. This poses a complex political problem, of course; for the hypothetical actors of left politics did not feel themselves to be addressed by the conventional socialist or communist parties. In fact this is not the correct way to pose the problem; such a formulation should begin by asking which left it was to which the working masses were indifferent, or perhaps even hostile. In other words, the approach should take as its starting point the specificity of the social formations on the periphery of the capitalist world, a question that inspired a number of important debates within the Comintern. However the Latin American left has been reluctant to consider this problematic, possibly because it might have led to a serious questioning of its own **perspectives**.⁷ The question arose again in the context of the Central American revolutions, although, due to the particular characteristics of those processes and that scenario, the discussion developed with very little reference to that held in the Comintern."

To sum up, then, as far as this first point is concerned, the situation is not entirely new. Only in a few exceptional cases was the Latin American left systematically anti-capitalist, even if it did opt for radical methods and strategies of struggle. The reason for it is to be found, as suggested earlier, in the specificity of capitalist development in the region and the identity of the actors whose interests, demands and expectations provided the foundation of the projects for change. And here, as in so many things, the analyst must take care not to be taken in by the discourse of the actors.

II. CHANGES IN THE SOCIOECONOMIC STRUCTURE

Acknowledging that the present situation of the left has antecedents is not tantamount as saying that we are dealing with a linear process. The development of **sectoral** perspectives and piecemeal proposals for change and adaptation has occurred within a context of structural transformations, cultural changes and institutional modifications, set in the framework of a redefinition of the international arena.

The crisis of the eighties and the response to it from the Latin American

governments has produced profound changes in labour markets, deepened social inequality and impoverished large segments of the working classes and the middle sectors. These were manifestations of the impact of technological change and global capitalist restructuring on Latin America; state intervention reinforced its negative impact on some groups and classes, forcing them to carry the burden of adjustment. Taken together these changes and policies foster even deeper differentiations within the popular classes. In the context of shrinking formal employment and downgrading of both working conditions and wage levels, some small sections of workers have been able to improve their relative position in terms of wages and living standards, while the majority has been left out. This differentiation has had an impact on the traditional forms of trade union militancy too. On the one hand, the overall fall in the number of jobs and in formal employment has reduced the level of union affiliation, to which the processes of flexible accumulation has also contributed. On the other hand, the growth in informal employment has meant that increasing numbers of workers find themselves outside the reaches of trade unions. Finally, a growing participation of middle class elements in the leadership of trade unions introduces additional imbalances between the union rank-and-file and their leaders.'

This aspect of the current problematic marks a difference from past situations. The proletariat has never constituted a numerical majority among the popular classes as a whole. The industrial proletariat in **particular**, which is central to the thinking of the socialist and communist left, has usually been a relative minority among the urban labouring classes, which encompass large numbers of self-employed, unpaid family workers, seasonal labourers and the like, which are either not involved in wage labour, or are only in an intermittent manner. However, from its earliest times the working class movement attempted to represent the working class as a whole – including both proletarianized and not yet or not fully proletarianized workers. Moreover, the proletarianization of the labour force – in the sense that it became wage-earning and not solely in terms of its disengagement from a source of reproduction – was a goal of both the trade unions and the left. This goal derived from the understanding of the dynamics of capitalism and on its objective tendencies of development, which were supposed to lead to an increasing conversion of non-wage into wage labour.

What we are now witnessing is a process of proletarianization that divorces growing numbers of the working population from their conditions of reproduction, together with expelling them from the formal labour market, de-waging them and as a result weakening the extent to which feelings of collective identity are a shared reference point. This is an aspect that did not enter into the left's calculations, since its magnitude and its

relation to the processes of accumulation go far beyond any discussion about a 'reserve labour army'. In some sense the past ability of the labour movement to represent the broad spectrum of the popular classes was based on capitalism's tendency to integrate the labour force into the production process in the interests of capital. Today the prevailing tendency is towards the accumulation of capital combined with social exclusion. The unemployed are no longer a reserve army of anything, and the concept of marginality, questioned and questionable in the sixties, has now gained legitimacy.

Classes and subjects

This is the context in which we have to address the issue of the apparent dissolution of classes into a broad spectrum of subjects and actors who would constitute themselves outside and independent of any stable collective articulation to the processes of accumulation. From this perspective growing internal differentiation of the traditional social base of the Latin American left (waged workers, professional middle sectors, technicians, small businessmen etc.) is also expressed through the emergence of a broad spectrum of 'new social subjects' whose ways of organization and demands relate only uneasily to the traditional organizations who were the focus of the politics of the left, namely parties and trade unions. The factors that define the identity of these new subjects and the issues around which they organize – e.g. gender, ethnicity, sexual preferences – are articulated in a complex and often tense way with class criteria. These actors and movements do have class references, insofar as they express, and act within, a framework of poverty, oppression and exploitation; yet in no sense can they be reduced to a crude class **determination**.¹⁰

In its most extreme manifestations the current theoretical shift in the discussion of social mobilisation presents it as the sum of individual motivations and problems, so that the possibility of a collective **recomposition** remains always contingent and unstable. If the concept of 'worker' or 'peasant' assesses a substantive relationship to class, the concept 'subject' in most cases suggests transitory identifications deriving from conjunctural motivations – or at the very bottom motivations that arise less from objective situations than from the way particular subjects 'read' them.

Any meaningful discussion of this question should start by acknowledging that it refers to rather complex processes, embracing widely differing contents, outreaches and characteristics; and that it works in quite different ways and with quite different meanings for different social classes. The destructuring of the popular classes is not matched by any

equivalent process among the ruling classes. The loss or transformation of identity among social actors is much more the experience of the poor than of the rich, of the workers rather than the capitalists, of trade unions more than enterprises. Structural changes are reducing the 'classical' proletariat, transforming what remains of it and driving the peasantry as a class to the very brink of extinction. Flexible accumulation calls for the drastic reduction of labour costs as a condition of the recovery of business profits. This economic condition demands certain political conditions too – the destructuring of the labour force into a sum of differentiated subjects or actors separated one from the other. While the concept of class implies a hypothesis of shared interests and a relatively clear consequent direction of collective activity, one individual is much like any other (with the result that the distinction between classes loses all **meaning**), or alternatively is so different from every other individual that any class-based grouping also becomes a mere fiction.

The destructuring of the working class, the peasantry and other actors in the world of labour has its counterpoint in the strengthening of the organizations and strategies of the capitalist class, increasingly supported by the state, the mass media and the international financial agencies. This forces us to develop an approach accounting for these **changes**, but obviously it is not enough in itself to invalidate the heuristic potential of the concept of class."

The new plurality of social actors and the specificity of their agendas evolved mostly independently of parties and trade unions – which has to do with a number of intervening factors. First among them is the context of authoritarianism and dictatorship which took shape in Latin America from the 1960s onwards and persisted well into the 1980s. Throughout those more than two decades the parties that mobilized popular and middle sector votes and demands were persecuted, banned and driven underground; their leaders and rank and file experienced violent persecution, harsh repression or were forced into **exile**. The history of human rights violations and of state terrorism is to a great extent the history of the repression against the members and sympathisers of these organizations, and indeed of anyone who had anything to do with them.

In the past these parties had taken on many of the demands that later would be raised by the 'new movements' – such as housing, access to basic services, nutrition, the political rights of women etc – while usually subordinating the specific demands of each sector to the political perspectives of the party, where these actors and their demands came to lose their specificity. The 'indigenous question' was reduced to a matter of land as land was reduced to a means of production; the question of the social condition of women was addressed from the point of view of the labour market, or of the right to vote, not in terms of gender. Together with other factors, the

elimination of parties and trade unions from the public arena, or at least the limits imposed on them, opened a space where these as well other more traditional demands – such as local or community-based issues – could be openly expressed and sometimes did not have to confront authoritarian or repressive responses.

This is not the time or the place to draw up a balance sheet of advantages or disadvantages of one or other kind of relationship. It is appropriate, however, to point out that as a result of these quite different origins and paths of development, the relationship between social movements and political parties has become one of the most complex issues, as well as one of the most conflictive, that the Latin American left has had to face. It is no accident that the most successful expression of the Latin American left – the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) – is also the one where the relationship between the social actors (trade union movement, community organizations, women's movements, and Christian Base Communities) and the party is, relatively speaking, fluent and without severe conflicts. At the other extreme, the Mexican PRD, Causa R in Venezuela or the Frente Grande in Argentina all point to the travails of both sets of actors in the search for forms of agreement and coordination. The recently founded Democratic Front for a New Guatemala (Frente Democrático Nueva Guatemala), if it manages to overcome the inevitable initial difficulties, could become a successful example of how social organizations have given birth to a political organization that will fight in the electoral sphere.¹²

In every case political questions are posed which, notwithstanding their links to the theoretical issues raised above, do require a differentiated approach. For here, specific as well as **conjunctural** circumstances bear a heavy burden, often to the point of determining the success or failure of a particular experiment.

III. PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

Do on-going changes in the institutional setting, with a relative consolidation of the mechanisms of electoral representation, play any role in the left's programmatic redefinitions, or are they rather the result of transformations in the international arena? Is there a reformist or even a conservative tendency in the institutional setting of representative democracy which might lead the left wing parties to soften their programmatic demands and converge on the centre?

The articulation of programmes and strategies was vigorously discussed by the First and Second Internationals. In those instances two principal questions occupied the centre of the debate: 1) is it possible for a **prole-**

tarian party to achieve control of the bourgeois state apparatus appealing to that state's apparatuses to that end? 2) If the answer is yes, is it possible to transform the bourgeois state while preserving those same institutions?" Although Latin American Socialist and Communist parties opted at an early stage for the electoral road, the issue was confronted in a concrete expression for the first time in 1970, when the Chilean Popular Unity won the elections and Salvador Allende became President. However, this was the last time the issue was debated. The tragic end of the Popular Unity government through a military coup encouraged and supported by the U.S. government proved that, in that conjuncture, those who had responded negatively to those earlier questions were correct; there was no institutional road to radical change. The Chilean experience did have an influence on the revolutionary organizations of Central America – a region where concern for legal institutions was conspicuously foreign to the political performance of the ruling classes.

Furthermore, the breakdown of the evolutionary road in Chile reinforced the identification of the political programme of the left with the means to achieve it. This confusion of levels and dimensions, which as a matter of fact began to take place after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, became more obvious in the Central American case. In some sense the left reproduced, with its own ideological imprint, the Schumpeterian reductionism with regard to democratic regimes. According to Joseph Schumpeter, democracy points to a set of electoral procedures (disregarding such fundamental questions as the balance between or independence of the different branches of government, the accountability of civil servants, the rule of law etc.), while for a great deal of the Latin American left the radicalism of proposals for change should be evaluated first and foremost by reference to the means chosen to achieve them. The armed road, whose purpose was to undermine the state apparatus and deliver a series of insurrectionary situations, was considered the identity card of a revolutionary perspective; in a similar vein the 'institutional road' to the global transformation of the capitalist system was rejected almost by definition. Put this way, the question of which road to follow took precedence over the question of the substantive content of proposals for change, in a markedly voluntaristic framework.

These elements make still sharper the contrast with the current situation, when the issue of the articulation of programmes and methods has disappeared from the agenda. The generalization of electoral processes and the much-debated assessment of the Central American revolutionary experiments have led to the reverse position from that assumed in the face of the Chilean conjuncture of 1970. It is now explicitly accepted that for the left there is no alternative to the electoral road. At the same time it is generally accepted that the proposals for change have to be moderated in order not

to threaten the stability and consolidation of the democratic regimes. The issue of the relation between the project and the methods or ways to achieve it has now reentered the debate through the literature, largely vulgar in character, about governability. What is at issue here is to avoid overburdening the state apparatus, thus ensuring it will not overheat or seize up, while preventing panicking or excessively threatening the actors situated on the right of the political **spectrum**.¹⁴

The theoretical and practical complexity of the issues involved in the debate about means and contents was overcome by the simplicity of the slogan 'Don't make waves'. At bottom it suggests an acknowledgement that the negative response to the questions posed a century ago was and remains the correct one, with the difference that today that conclusion, far from leading to a creative search for alternatives, has the effect of blocking such a search and limiting the content and perspectives of any project for change to what is acceptable within the institutional layout of the political system – **i.e.** within the current balance of power. Thus, just when the discourse of the autonomy of the political system in relation to its **structural** base becomes broadly accepted, the existence of that system is linked to or identified with the preservation of a given structural configuration – the actually existing capitalist system in a given country – and subsequently with a specific class domination.

In a particularly graphic and poignant way, the split of the FMLN in El Salvador into two different organizations points to the complex nature of the issue in both its theoretical and operative **projections**.¹⁵ While internal strategic, methodological as well as operative differences existed within the FMLN from its very inception in 1980, they deepened during the peace negotiations and surfaced after the January 1992 accords with the **right-wing ARENA's** (Nationalist Republican Alliance) Salvadorean government. Under the leadership of Joaquin Villalobos, the ERP renamed itself as 'Expresion Renovadora del Pueblo' thus wiping out any reference to revolution while keeping the original acronym. After several open confrontations with the leadership of FMLN – including accusing them of 'ideologism', militarism and destabilization of the post-war political process – ERP together with RN formally abandoned the FMLN. In addition to the former Social Democratic MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, by then a minor political party which keeps its affiliation to the Socialist International) the former guerrillas opted to build the new **Partido Democrático** (Democratic Party, PD). In May 1995 PD submitted a 'San **Andrés** Pact' to other political parties and the government. Focusing on economic policy issues, the Pact reproduces the on-going government's programme of macro-economic adjustment and was repudiated by the entire opposition. The Pact was eventually signed by its proponents together with ARENA and the government, thus projecting

the image of an appendicular adherence of former guerrillas to the political leadership of El Salvador's right wing **hard-liners**.¹⁶ The three organizations which remained as FMLN decided to dissolve themselves in order to transform the Frente into a political party made up of internal tendencies – much as Mexico's PRD or Brazil's PT. Yet the priority attention paid to the still unaccomplished socioeconomic and human rights commitments of the Peace Accords in order to have the government honouring them – such as land distribution and effective dismantling of death squads – puts FMLN in a defensive stance vis-à-vis the government, ARENA and former leftists' claims to look forward and leave the past behind.

The social and the political

This abandonment or postponement of global proposals for change fosters the development of a disjunction between social protest and political behaviour that has been going on in several countries. Downgrading living standards of broad layers of low income and middle classes – expressed for example in massive impoverishment, social marginalization, growing inequality, unemployment, personal insecurity – has not resulted so far in any shift of that population towards political options involving electoral opposition to incumbent governments. When they enter the voting booth the poor and those who are growing poorer tend in general terms to avoid the most radical options – even those sectors of the population who had turned to radical political options in the previous decade. Take for example the reelection of **Alberto Fujimori** in **Peru** and **Carlos Menem** in **Argentina**; the majority vote for **Fernando H. Cardoso** rather than **Lula** in **Brazil**; the steady growth of the conservative PAN (National Action Party) in **Mexico** while the PRD (Revolutionary Democratic Party) experiences a number of electoral setbacks; the electoral triumph of ARENA in the municipal districts where the FMLN guerrillas had gathered consistent popular support during the revolutionary war. So the hypothesis that a sharp and general deterioration in the conditions of life of the people will necessarily lead people to move to the left of the political spectrum has proved problematic once again." It would appear that after a cycle of military dictatorships, revolutions, wars, counterinsurgency and crisis, Latin American politics is resuming its more traditional profile: conservative domination resting on the electoral acquiescence of the dominated.

While avoiding excessive generalizations, it can be suggested that we are facing a shift in the political mood of segments of the Latin American working classes who in the recent past were willing to support, and even bring about, proposals for quite profound social and political change; or who at the very least had participated in important mobilizations supporting democratization, movements which implicitly or explicitly

embraced projects of far reaching social transformation. The return to electoral democracy that is going on unevenly across the continent, and which in a real sense is an outcome of those mass movements, has nevertheless shaped a scenario in which the options for social transformation and the perspectives of the left are either severely diluted or quite simply absent. The social deterioration that has occurred in the course of the last decade within the framework of institutionalised democracy has provoked often very violent protests and no less intense repression in return – yet there is still no sign that social frustration and protests are likely to be transformed into political opposition. The reorientation of the left towards **sectoral** issues has contributed to keep people's dissatisfaction within the borders of the social realm.

There is a reciprocal causal relationship between these two aspects. On the one hand, changes in the international scene and in domestic life (political, socio-economic, institutional and cultural) have produced in the organizations of the left a disorientation and a search for new directions, inhibiting or at best postponing the formulation of integral alternative proposals at the very moment when such proposals would be most timely. On the other hand, the absence of alternative proposals reinforces the demobilization of people who are suffering as a result of the current situation and underlines their lack of confidence that they will find in politics any solution to their setbacks. The electoral support for characters such as **Fujimori** and **Menem**, therefore, can be understood as evidence that people are seeking an alternative to the lack of change and to the elegant and increasingly incomprehensible rhetoric of most conventional political actors. The room filled by these neo-populist **neoliberal** political caudillos is to a large degree the room the left has been unable to fill, or whence it was ousted by **repression**.¹⁸ It is precisely at this level that the biggest political failure of the Latin American left becomes apparent – its inability to define a discourse or a solid and stable relationship with the oppressed, the impoverished and those exploited by the capitalist system.

Amid ruptures, reciprocal challenges and guilty self-justifications, some of the parties in Chile, Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Colombia who would describe themselves as left-wing, or reformist at the very least, are accepting the concept of democracy suggested by liberal political theorists in the U.S. (e.g. Schumpeter, Dahl) and Europe (e.g. Bobbio). Here politics is robbed of any potential for progressive change while restricted to a range of institutional or formal practices – so it should come as no surprise that the people treat it with distrust and seek other ways to express their protests. Nor should we be surprised that people opt for authoritarian leaders and highly personalized options when so many actors on the left display **intent** on demonstrating that there are no possible alternatives and that the

hypothesis of global change is utopian and impractical and should be abandoned. Simultaneously concepts like 'people', 'working class', 'popular classes', which expressed and mobilized the social and political identity of the exploited and the oppressed, have been emptied of their traditional meanings – an expression of the crisis of social and political identities in broad sectors of the population. The popular identity, which in the political history of Latin America opened the way to citizenship for workers, women and indigenous peoples, is now substituted by the marginalization of the people and their replacement by a citizenry of isolated individuals whose reciprocal alienation is reinforced through the institutional reproduction of the social exclusion of most of the population.

Chiapas and the Left: a failure to connect

The uprising of the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de **Liberacion Nacional** – Zapatista National Liberation Army) in Chiapas brings a particularly dramatic example of the uneasy relations between social and political actors, between social conflicts and political strategies. The entire Mexican political spectrum was taken by surprise by the Zapatistas, and the initial responses of support or condemnation should be understood as a function of that surprise rather than a result of reflection. Both political parties and the government had dismissed without a second thought the possibility that such a thing could happen in the Mexico of globalization and NAFTA, or in the post USSR's withering away era.¹⁹ The PRD in particular, despite the state repression of its members and persistent denunciations of electoral fraud, insisted on the institutional road as the only way to achieve democracy and social change in Mexico; at the same time Carlos Salinas de Gortari was pronouncing the end of the Mexican Revolution from the Presidential chair. The Chiapas uprising, therefore, arrived for most people like a thunderclap on a sunny day.

Militarily, Chiapas was a noteworthy operation in armed propaganda. The successful seizing of five medium-sized towns, the combats during the first week, the subsequent orderly withdrawal, together with a most efficient resort to mass media, placed the rebels at the centre of national and international political life. Weapons were instrumental in turning world attention to Chiapas and the EZLN, much more than means to seize state or even local power, nor were they ever intended to be – the armed confrontations ceased after a fortnight. The **communiqués** through which the EZLN made itself known summarised the claims of the Mexican left – the illegitimate nature of Carlos Salinas de **Gortari's** government; the repressive stance of the Mexican state; **PRI's** (**Partido Revolucionario Institucional** – Institutional Revolutionary Party, the main government party) authoritarianism and corruption – as well as its demands for agrarian

reform, popular structural changes, historical rights for indigenous communities, sweeping democratization, competitive and clear elections. The synthesis of denunciations and demands was placed in a symbolic framework which referred to an uninterrupted popular and national liberation revolution (e.g. the appeal to the national popular hero **Emiliano Zapata**) relying on the armed struggle.

It is not yet clear what it was that proved too much for the Mexican political left to accept; whether it was the fact that their demands had been presented in a format emphasising their confrontational potential, or whether it was the appeal to a symbolism and a method that the left had largely given up in the process of seeking acceptance as an actor by the system (of which, however, it remained critical). In this sense it is striking that most appeals issued during those early months by subcomandante Marcos were directed to 'civil society' rather than to the left-wing parties.²⁰ A wide range of social organizations inserted themselves into the vacuum that opened up between the guerrillas and the parties; they forced the government of Carlos Salinas to order a ceasefire and stop the bombing, and in February **1995** they were able to stop a new government offensive.

The activism of the social organizations contrasts with the ambiguities of the PRD, which criticized the EZLN for its recourse to arms, but was not in a position to accept the legitimacy in certain conjunctures, of this form of political struggle. Despite the fact that it was the most severe critic, and the most visible victim, of the fraudulent and authoritarian Mexican political regime, the PRD could not bring itself to admit that in certain extreme situations, the right to resist oppression by whatever means people felt to be most effective is a right in itself – a right whose acceptance goes back to both Greek classical political philosophy and medieval Christian political theology. In a country with a tradition of political violence like Mexico's, the question of violence was buried in a stream of rhetoric and in the unconditional defence of the actually existing legal system.

The trip of Cuauhtemoc **Cardenas** – PRD's presidential candidate – to the **Lacandon** jungle on the eve of the elections of August **1994** proved to be a disaster. The EZLN misinterpreted Cardenas' initiative as a cynical move to gain votes; as a result subcomandante Marcos made a public criticism of the lack of democracy and centralization of power within the PRD which was widely disseminated by those media that supported the government. In a society like Mexico, where authoritarianism is also part of the political culture of the popular classes, the image of a Presidential candidate taking verbal abuse from an anonymous masked man could not have been more negative. The electoral consequences of these and other failures were clearly seen in August **1994**. The PRD did not incorporate the EZLN's demands into its national electoral platform – they were left as a matter for local political campaigning. Yet the PRI won Chiapas again, and

the complaints of electoral fraud did not succeed in getting the elections annulled. After a few months the 'rebel government' of the PRD candidate for Chiapas' governor – a well respected social activist – dissolved into nothing; in these circumstances the central government decided to remove the PRI governor and appoint an interim government which included one of the principal intellectual supporters of the EZLN rising. Moreover, when new local elections were held on November 12, 1995, Subcommander Marcos called for electoral abstention and plainly disengaged the EZLN from any formal or informal association to PRD. His appeal prevented victories of the PRD's candidates – which, according to PRD sources, had been nominated by grass-roots and Mayan village organizations – and, on the contrary, objectively led to PRI's triumph even in districts under Zapatista control.

The failure to find common ground between Zapatistas, PRD and the smaller organizations of the political left occurred in a context in which the government and the PRI have access to resources which enable them to encourage divisions and combine negotiation with threats. In fact, the situation affords the government additional room for manoeuvre. Two years on, the EZLN has been limited to a local force and seems to be losing the political initiative. Its expectation that similar upheavals would show up in other parts of Mexico suffering as much or even more poverty and exploitation as Chiapas proved astray – nothing of that kind occurred even where there were large concentrations of indigenous people. The support of 'civil society' has proved to be disorganized and it is now declining, amidst economic crisis and political scandals featured by members of the Salinas de Gortari's family. The absence of a common ground for both left-of-centre political parties and Chiapas' rebels has prevented thus far the emergence of an integrated social/political left. Finally, after two years marked by neither military actions nor other spectacular events, the EZLN and Marcos are slowly disappearing from the headlines of newspapers and from prime time television news.

In a setting where the return to arms is no longer an option for either side – because of shortages of weapons and internal divisions within the EZLN on the one hand, and the national and international political pressure on the government as well as differences of opinion within the army, on the other – the plebiscite of August 1995, which produced a majority of votes supporting EZLN's conversion into a 'political force' (sic), could provide the EZLN with both an opportunity for an honourable exit and a threat with having to face up to its disappearance as a political actor even on a local level. The first would allow the guerrillas to present the laying down of their arms as a democratic recognition of the will of 'civil society'. The second, because the EZLN cannot individually aspire to becoming anything more than a local political party, losing its national presence and

even having to compete with national political parties within Chiapas itself – unless some sort of coalition could be built. And furthermore, since Mexican electoral law forbids building local political parties, the observance of the democratic mandate of 'civil society' would drive the Zapatistas to enter very long and complex constitutional negotiations.

Meanwhile, time is working against the rebels. Their social base, even within the indigenous communities, is being eroded by the lack of supplies, the difficulties of communication, and fatigue. The contrast between the steady flow of food and supplies sent by the government to communities outside the EZLN 'liberated zone' and the situation within the zone, is enormous. The Mexican government is investing huge sums from its own resources in Chiapas, in addition to a \$450 million loan from the World Bank. More government money has gone into Chiapas in the last two years than in the previous two centuries. In this financial sense the armed propaganda operation of January 1994 was also success, although for the moment their beneficiaries are the communities that did not answer the Zapatista call.

At the same time, the willingness of the Mexican government to include in its negotiations with the EZLN the question of indigenous communities throughout Mexico, and not just in Chiapas, offers the indigenous commanders (the 'Revolutionary Clandestine Committee') the chance to become spokespersons on behalf of all the indigenous peoples, including those who have not been part of the conflict, or do not live in Chiapas; indeed they can become the legitimate, perhaps the exclusive interlocutors of government on these issues. But this opportunity would mean the disengagement of the demands of the indigenous peoples from the overall political project within which the original Zapatista pronouncements had articulated them. In this sense there could emerge a difference of perspectives and perceptions between the indigenous leaders of the EZLN and the mestizo military commanders, with Marcos outstanding among them. In fact, as government-EZLN talks proceed, there is an evident protagonism of indigenous Zapatista commanders which contrasts with Marcos' former visibility.

The present position of the Zapatista uprising (for we cannot yet talk of a final outcome) reveals the effect of a combination of the negotiating experience of the Mexican government and the failures of the left to seize the moment. Ideologically disarmed, the political left was not up to the challenge presented to it by Zapatismo, and this opened a space for manoeuvre for the clientilistic and cooptative methods characteristic of the Mexican political tradition – where government is master. It may be argued that, in all, the Mexican political left read the EZLN in a non-political way, or out from a power perspective. It is difficult to avoid the impression that the left paid more attention to the symbolism of Zapatismo – the romantic

mystery of the masked commanders, the literary strength of **Marcos'** writings, the reassessment of **Emiliano** Zapata, the risk or promise of heroic deaths – than to the political project submitted to civil society and the left and democratic parties, chief among them the PRD.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE POSSIBLE AND THE DESIRABLE

It is an empirical fact that the majority of organizational expressions of the political left in Latin America have postponed or rejected the formulation of proposals for a global alternative to capitalism. Given that that is the case, there is wide room for them to consolidate their position in the political system and even to lay the ground for further major advances both in terms of electoral support and of formulating more far-reaching alternatives. The actually existing capitalisms in Latin America have a series of exposed surfaces on which the left can write its critical proposals even without going so far as to criticise capitalism as a global system. When somewhere between two-fifths and three-quarters of the population live in poverty – and between a third and a half of them in extreme poverty – it does not require a great leap of imagination to see that there are enormous objective possibilities for the development of democratic and popular political perspectives. The effective occupation and expansion of these political spaces by the left might in fact provide a starting point for a strategy for gradual social change.

In this sense and within these limits, electoral processes and experiences of municipal or regional control are particularly relevant. At a time when large segments of the popular classes are distrustful of politics and politicians, local and regional administrations could prove to people that the left not only claims to be better, but actually is better. At the same time political power at these levels could provide the left with experience in dealing with matters which it has traditionally disregarded as irrelevant – such as facing concrete problems; the need to bring about effective and appropriate answers to them; budget management, among others. This is particularly relevant at a time when many people place greater emphasis on the management of local resources and on solving municipal-level problems than on national politics. It may also be that the presence of the left in these areas could have the important result of enhancing the reach of local administrations, taking advantage of the current emphasis by multilateral financial agencies on administrative decentralization and community participation. In this sense, this type of experience could help the parties and other organizations of the left to develop political responses to the problems they face, as opposed to the strong academic or ideological biases which has characterised many of its arguments and much of its

language until now.

However, if the left aspires to something else than the local management of macroeconomic policies defined elsewhere it must be capable of articulating these local and regional levels with national politics. Poverty, social marginalization, insecurity, external debt, financial speculation, the reactivation of industry, democratization... all these issues inescapably call for an involvement at the national level, if there is to be the slightest hope of having even a minimal impact on them. In a context in which there is no global critique of capitalism, and in which furthermore the continued existence of representative democracy is taken as a point of absolute principle, it is nevertheless possible to overcome its limitations by articulating it with the many and varied forms of participatory democracy. In this sense, too, the experiences of local and provincial government in Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela, Mexico among others provide some successful examples.

The combination of experiences of popular participation with the institutional procedures of representative democracy can also lead to a reelaboration of the concept and the practice of citizenship on the basis of the initiatives and interests of the popular classes, going beyond the distorting and limiting effect of the individualism through which citizenship is conceptualized in capitalist ideology. A reelaboration of citizenship which emphasises that part of its meaning which arises from social struggles for a decent life and for the collective design of a shared destiny. That is, a citizenship in which the exercise of individual rights is rooted in and enriched by the day to day practice of collective action. At bottom it is a question of recreating the concept of citizenship – just as the ruling class does it although from and in its self-interest, when calling for the collective exercise of their civil rights through corporate business pressures, manipulation of the mass media, mobilisation of government agencies and multilateral financial institutions, much more than through the exercise of the conventional principle of 'one person one vote'. From the point of view of the popular classes, it is a matter of legitimating a concept of citizenship which embraces the experiences of progressive collective action and of its own labour, settlers', women's, indigenous', or any other, organizations. In this sense, representative democracy would come to mean continuity and not rupture with the history of struggle and bargaining forged by the popular classes.

Tentatively then, and without being ingenuous, my hypothesis is that the current situation offers interesting possibilities to a left that is prepared to take them on board. Systems of representative democracy should not be seen as obstacles to projects for overall transformation; after all, the recent democratization of Latin America is, in the first instance, the result of the mobilizations, the struggles and the sacrifices of popular organizations and

the organizations of the left. It could be argued that this was not the democracy that they fought for, but without popular involvement and the participation of the left, not even this would have been achieved. On the other hand, the attempts to develop along a revolutionary path have not been able to offer, thus far, very much more successful results. It is important, therefore, that we avoid fetishizing formal institutions and procedures – either from a positive or a negative stance.

Representative democracy is much more than the restricted – and often fraudulent and corrupt – versions 'actually existing' in several countries in our region. To accept the rules of the democratic game in these circumstances may mean doing democracy the greatest disservice, or at the very least accepting the blackmail of those who use the forms of democracy to reproduce the domination of minorities and further pervert the living standards of the popular majorities. Yet the refusal to participate in this farce does not automatically imply a turn to violent confrontation. A creative politics must be capable of finding or inventing effective ways of getting through these questions.

Once again the Latin American left must face the challenge of endowing democratic institutions with a real capacity to social transformation from the perspective of the popular classes. That is, to assess and strengthen the value of democracy without legitimating capitalism or abandoning the project for global socialist transformation. This involves searching and striving for **sectoral** or everyday improvements while focusing on the overall capitalist system as the very enemy to confront. When things are seen in historical perspective, we have to acknowledge that the difficulties we face today are neither greater nor less than those we have had to overcome in the past – but they are different. If the Latin American left was able in the violent, repressive and fraudulent contexts of the recent past to build a bridge of communication and representation to broad sectors of the popular classes, it would be foolish to suggest that in the present context, when possibilities are opening up within the institutional make-up, the enterprise is bound to fail. The efficacy of the Latin American left in building a solid popular base has always been founded on people's hopes rather than on their fears or just their needs. However, when odds look so deceitful, hopes have to be nurtured and raised by political education and commitment. Or, as Oliver Cromwell allegedly put it: 'Trust in God, and keep your powder dry'.

Translation by Mike Gonzalez

NOTES

1. For example Juan J. Linz and Arturo Valenzuela (eds): *The Failure of Presidential Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1994).

2. This piece continues from some of the author's previous writings: 'Is socialism still an alternative for the third world?' in **W.K. Tabb** (ed): *The future of socialism: perspectives from the left* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1990) pp.205–218; 'What future for socialism?' in *NACLA Report on the Americas* XXV (5): May 1992: pp.13–16; 'After the Revolution: democratization and social change in Central America' in Shafik **Jorge Handal** and Carlos M. Vilas: *The socialist option in Central America: two reassessments* (Monthly Review, New York, 1993) pp.79–143. For reasons of brevity the term 'Latin America' also includes the Caribbean.
3. See for example the compilation of source materials in Michel **Lowy** (ed): *Marxism in Latin America from 1909 to the present* (Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1992) and Bary Can and Steve **Ellner** (eds): *The Latin American left: from the fall of Allende to perestroika* (Westview Press, Boulder Co, 1993).
4. Carlos M. Vilas 'Imperfect competition: the superpowers in Latin America' in John Weeks (ed) *Beyond superpower rivalry: Latin America and the third world* (New York University Press, New York, 1991) pp.83–93.
5. See Carlos M. Vilas: *The Sandinista Revolution: national liberation and social transformation in Central America* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1986); 'Nicaragua: a revolution that fell from the grace of the people' in *The Socialist Register* 1991 (Merlin Press, London, 1991) pp.302–321; *Between earthquakes and volcanoes: market, state and revolutions in Central America* (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1995) – particularly chapter 5.
6. Carlos M. Vilas: *Transición desde el subdesarrollo* (Nueva Sociedad, Caracas, 1989) pp.93–101.
7. However see Ernesto Giudice: *Imperialismo y liberación nacional* (Granica, Buenos Aires, 1974) first published in 1940; also Cesar Germana: 'La polémica Haya de la Torre-Maritegui' in *Análisis* (Lima) 2–3 (April 1977) pp.143–181; Manuel Caballero: *Latin America and the Comintern 1919–1943* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1986).
8. See for example Orlando **Núñez Soto**: 'La tercera fuerza social en los movimientos de liberación nacional' in *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos* 27 (1980) pp.141–157; and 'La idwlogia como fuerza material y la juventud como fuerza ideológica' in J. Wheelock et al: *Estado y clases sociales en Nicaragua* (ANICS/CIERA, Managua, 1982) pp.125–147; Carlos M. Vilas *The Sandinista Revolution* chap 3; 'Popular insurgency and social revolution in Central America' in *Latin American Perspectives* 56 (Winter 1988) pp.55–77; *Transición desde el subdesarrollo* pp.49–74. It has also to be recalled that in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution and the Sino-Soviet controversy, several Communist parties experienced internal splits – as in Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Brazil – which additionally weakened their political hold.
9. Almost 60% of the delegates to the 1994 Congress of the Brazilian CUT were university graduates – in a country with 32 million illiterates: **Iram Jacome Rodrigues**: 'The CUT: new unionism at a crossroads' *NACLA REPORT ON THE AMERICAS* XXVII (6), May–June 1995, pp.3–34. In Argentina several trade unions participated in the privatization of state enterprises in their respective sectors (electricity, oil, maritime transport, commerce), thus becoming employers of their own members. The issue has provoked intense debates in Nicaragua on the privatization of state enterprises on behalf of their workers. See Carlos M. Vilas 'Farewell to the working class? Latin American workers after crisis and neoliberal reforms' in **Sandor Halebsky** and **Richard Harris** (eds): *Capital, power and inequality in Latin America* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1995) pp. 137–163.
10. Carlos M. Vilas 'Actores, sujetos, movimientos: Donde quedaron las clases?' in *Sociologica* 28, May–August 1995 pp.61439.
11. It is a tragic irony that while the ruling classes remain firmly attached to the traditional motto 'divide et impera' (divide and conquer) in their relation to the working and popular classes, the so-called post-modern left has abandoned any meaningful concern for collective organization and struggles. A post-marxist left becomes fascinated with what

it considered to be a more sophisticated approach to social dynamics—as reduced to inter-individual contingent articulations—while the ruling classes indulge in what were once considered to be the simplistic views of Marxism—e.g. the actual manipulation of state power as a private tool for exploitation and domination.

12. FDNG represents the first attempt at a broad-based 'social-political left' and to unite Mayan and workers' and peasants' organizations since CUC (Comite de Unidad Campesina) fell victim to repression in the 1980s. Unlike CUC, FDNG also embraces human rights organizations and presented its own candidates in the November 1995 elections. On this occasion, and in spite of an aggressive institutional setting which included some fraudulent manipulations, FDNG collected about 8 percent of the overall turnout, thus appointing 6–7 representatives to the Guatemalan parliament—all of them front-line union, human rights and indigenous organizations' activists, including several well-known women activists.
13. See a summary of the debate in **Arghiri Emmanuel**: 'The state in the transitional period', in *New Left Review*, 113–114 (Jan–April 1979) pp. 111–131.
14. The issue was initially posed by Michael Crozier et al in *The crisis of democracy* (New York University Press, New York, 1975) and then taken up again in the literature on transitions to democracy—e.g. Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillipe Schmitter, *Transitions from authoritarian rule: tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986) esp. pp.13–14; Adam Przeworski, 'Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Social Conflicts', in Jon Elster & Rune Slagstad (eds) *Constitutionalism and Democracy*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp. 59–80.
15. FMLN (Frente Farabundo **Marti** para la Liberacion Nacional) was made up of five politico-military organizations: FPL (Fuerzas Populares de Liberacion, the largest one), the Salvadorean Communist Party (PCS), **Ejercito** Revolucionario del Pueblo (Revolutionary's People Army, ERP), Resistencia Nacional (RN), and the Central American Workers' Revolutionary Party (PRTC).
16. See the text of the Pact in *El Diario de Hoy* (San Salvador), 31 May 1995. Interestingly enough, the adherence of former leftists to this particular version of consensual politics has not been coupled by their right-wing partners: ARENA keeps on publicly honouring the memory of the late Roberto D'Abuissou (a founder of both ARENA and death squads, and according to the UN's Truth Commission the intellectual author of the massive killing of six Jesuit priests and two female university workers in November 1989) while its 'Principles, Goals and By-laws' remain committed 'To defend our Western traditions from the ideological assault as well the permanent aggression from international communism' as the party's primary goal.
17. See Vilas *Between earthquakes and volcanoes*, cit. chapt. 1.
18. See in this respect Carlos M. Vilas: 'Entre la democracia y el neoliberalismo: los caudillos politicos de la posmodernidad' in *Socialismo y Participacion*, 69, November 1994.
19. The belief that the time for armed struggle was definitively over for the left is also one of the central assumptions Jorge Castañeda's much publicized book *Utopia Unarmed. The Latin American Left After the Cold War*. (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1993).
20. *Shadows of Tender Fury. The Letters and Communiques of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*. (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1995).