# THE IMPASSE OF THE LATIN AMERICAN LEFT

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# INTRODUCTION

In the first five years of the twenty-first century, Latin America produced a wave of electoral defeats of the previously invincible supporters of neoliberalism, along with a corresponding opening to one of the most significant processes of change in political leadership in the region's history. In a short sequence, which accelerated between 2002 and 2006, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and El Salvador all witnessed self-declared anti-neoliberal parties and presidents form governments. As a result, in the first decade of the twenty-first century more progressive Latin American governments were in office than had been witnessed since the 1930s and 1940s.

These governments managed to install a certain degree of hegemony that allowed them to sustain themselves for surprisingly long periods—varying from ten to almost twenty years in office—which included three constituent processes and various presidential reelections, including changes in the executive leadership of the governing parties (except in the cases of Bolivia and Nicaragua). However, in the last several years, for many reasons that will be analyzed in this book, this process entered a phase of exhaustion—the so-called end of the cycle—which manifested itself in an electoral defeat in Argentina in 2015, an institutional coup d'état in Brazil in 2016 and the subsequent election of a far-right government there in 2018, negative referendum results for the reelection of Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2016 and his overthrow in a coup in 2019, and the slim victory of Lenín Moreno (Rafael Correa's successor in the PAIS Alliance) in Ecuador in 2017, followed by Moreno's sharp turn to the right once in office. This phase of exhaustion has also been made evident in explosive form in the Venezuelan crisis since 2013, as well as that of the regime of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua since 2018.

Attempting to provide an integral account of the ascent, consolidation, and crisis of these political experiences, this book aims to offer an interpretive

framework capable of meeting the analytical challenges related to two fundamental elements—historicity and political characterization, both of which give our analysis a significance beyond the specific Latin American context.

The historicity of the progressive cycle is evident in the short term, as it constitutes a significant chapter in the history of the present—a chapter that we can provisionally describe as two decades of Latin American progressivism. These decades have been marked by a line of tension between neoliberalism, anti-neoliberalism, and post-neoliberalism, as well as by the discontinuity that progressive governments introduced, in terms of their discourse and their practices, relative to the preceding neoliberal cycle. Hence the expression "an epoch of change" is justified. At the same time, and this calls into question its political character, the period's scope in terms of "epoch making" is not as evident, at least in the sense that Antonio Gramsci suggested, in that epochal change involves a profound and durable break, a qualitative difference that can delineate the distance separating mere change from transformation, the latter of which surpasses the strictly political level so as to also reach structural and cultural levels.

In this sense, the governments that proclaimed themselves to be post-neoliberal or revolutionary were evaluated through these prisms from their right and from their left, and, in both cases, were judged as having gone too far or fallen short of their respective proclamations and aspirations. The historiography of the coming decades, weighing the impact of these phenomena that we cannot yet fully measure, will allow us to evaluate the depth of this most recent progressive period over the medium to long term.

That very depth could be compared, mutatis mutandis, with the impact of the progressive Latin American governments of the 1930s and 1940s, which were the consequence of another wave or cycle of popular mobilization, and which functioned as a compromise solution, as a way of tempering and deactivating conflict, thereby opening up an epoch of passive revolution that proved quite successful in the short term. That epoch lasted until another cycle of mobilization and conflict appeared, beginning between the close of the 1940s and the middle of the 1950s, and ending in the 1970s with the militarist wave that devastated the diverse expressions—national-popular and revolutionary socialist—of popular movements built and strengthened over the course of at least half a century of history.

Beyond its historical scope, the Latin American progressive experience, in terms of its political characterization, has raised its own contribution to the debates and processes of renovation and reconfiguration of the various lefts on

a global scale, now three decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Apart from the details and specificities that will appear over the course of the book, we can argue that Latin America at the beginning of the twenty-first century was characterized by the eruption of a progressive project that looked to a post-neoliberal horizon, which was weakened by its populist characteristics and ended up being cornered by a combination of protests arising from below and by the restorative reaction of neoliberal and even oligarchic right-wing forces. Without delving into the often semantic academic disputes over the meaning of "post-neoliberalism" in twenty-first century Latin America, we deliberately treat the progressive projects as having introduced a contested and never fully realized post-neoliberal horizon to politics in various countries, rather than treating post-neoliberalism as an accomplished fact of these governments.

The notion of progressivism is conceptually vast and ambiguous, as is the actual field of left, center-left, and national-popular expressions that captured state power. This was understood by progressive leaders themselves as they sought a minimum common denominator, in the same way that critics, opponents, and analysts tried to find evidence of an overarching model or shared framework.

As a result, "progressive" became an elusive but omnipresent term, developing into the qualifying adjective with which these governments have been conventionally characterized. It has become a key word in the lexicon of live debates, as much in the political arena as in the academic one. Yet, in relation to the content that it attempts to designate, the notion of progressivism has the distinct virtue of pointing to constitutive aspects of the projects and practices of these governments.

In effect, this notion belongs to the language through which it was historically developed, from the Marxist left, to describe social democratic and populist programs and sociopolitical forces that sought to transform and reform capitalism by introducing a dose of intervention and state regulation, along with the redistribution of wealth and, in the case of Latin America, anti-imperialism and developmentalism. This last aspect, today presented as neo-developmentalism, connects with the notion of progress and helps to define the horizon and character of the project, as well as the criticisms, from environmentalist and postcolonial perspectives, which directly call into question the very ideas of progress and development in their expressions over past centuries, as well as in their prolongation in the twenty-first century.

It should be noted that, alongside progressivism, another polemical concept—on which we will not unduly detain ourselves because of the

complexity involved—runs through contemporary Latin American debate: that of populism. Suffice it to note the ambivalence of a concept that, on the one hand, served the right in its conservative and reactionary criticisms of progressivism for its statism, welfarism, clientelism, and authoritarianism, and, on the other hand, left-opponents of progressivism, whose critique of populism stressed the inconsistent record of progressive governments toward anti-neoliberalism and anti-capitalism. Left critics of populism also criticized what they saw as its coerced multiclassism, which in reality disguised a substantial continuity of division between classes and, most important, the emergence of specific elite groups, class fractions, and bureaucracies under progressivism that occupied crucial positions in the prevailing relations of domination.

The siege on the progressive project and practice, under the banner of populism, intensified around 2013, as the effects of the global crisis of 2008 began to impact on Latin America in political terms. Governments no longer had the resources to ensure both the accumulation and the redistribution of wealth. From below and to the left of progressivism, sometimes even breaking off from the perimeters of alliances and coalitions with progressive governments, others from an independence that had never actually been forsaken, there sprouted diverse experiences of struggles, mobilizations, and protests that, without managing to articulate a left alternative and remaining dispersed or sporadic, illustrated cracks and ruptures in the left flank of progressive hegemony.

However, in the context of a crisis that became organic, it was right-wing Latin American forces, as we pointed out at the outset, that took advantage of the conjuncture to recover the political initiative that they had lost in the mid-2000s. Witness the assumption of the presidency by center-right Luis Lacalle Pou in Uruguay in 2019, far-right Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2019, Jeanine Áñez in Bolivia also in 2019, conservative Mauricio Macri in Argentina in 2015, and the return to power of reactionary Sebastián Piñera in Chile in 2018. However, the return of the right represents only its relative recovery, which is showing its limits very quickly, not only because it has not been able to extend and generalize itself, but also because, in countries such as Brazil and Argentina, the restorative project of neoliberal elites and old oligarchies presented itself in a brutal manner, without hesitation or gestures toward constructing consensus, demonstrating rapacity and cynicism in the exercise of government, alongside incompetence in the economic domain. Moreover, important exceptions should be noted to these electoral trends, most prominently the election to the presidency of center-leftist Andrés Manuel López

Obrador in Mexico in 2018, as well as the return of center-left Peronism to the presidency of Argentina in 2019 in the figure of Alberto Fernández, with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (no relation) as vice president.

In the current scenario, which remains open to multiple outcomes, it must be recognized that progressivism, in spite of its undebatable crisis and its evident miseries, has neither died nor been tossed into the dustbin of history; rather, it remains an option that is positioned as an alternative to the right-wing trajectory on the disputed terrain of state power, while social and anticapitalist lefts—the movements and organizations in struggle—remain on the respectable but bounded terrain of resistance, finding it difficult to serve as centers for the accumulation and expansion of sociopolitical forces. Therefore, despite its defeats, its crises, and the inexorable advance of the end of a historical and political cycle in which a certain progressive hegemony reigned, from various perspectives there continues to be an insistence on the formula of a new progressivism that would not renounce but would simply amend the limits or errors of the old.[1]

*Argument*

Three interrelated arguments lie at the core of this book. They move through three levels of analysis—the political, the economic, and the ideological—to weave together an overarching portrait of the phenomenon of progressivism in twenty-first century Latin America.

First, at the political level, we home in on the dynamic conflicts and shifting balance of forces between popular movements from below, on the one hand, and on the other hand the capacities of the dominant classes to maintain their power and exercise hegemony through consent, coercion, or co-optation/integration. Crucially, we argue that the era of progressivism in the twenty-first century was made possible by the preceding period of plebeian upsurge in the 1990s, fueled by a multitude of social movements whose demands and practices pivoted around a triad of territory, autonomy, and horizontalism. This plebeian upsurge of popular rebellions helped to usher in a crisis of neoliberal hegemony in the early 2000s, which eventually found formal political expression in a series of electoral victories for left as well as center-left parties. The governments that these progressive parties formed achieved hegemonic rule between 2006 and 2013, institutionalizing social movements through incorporation into the apparatuses of the state, rolling out targeted redistributive social programs and instituting forms of state

capitalism that violated some of the precepts of neoliberalism without altering the underlying socioproductive matrices of these societies. This period of progressive hegemony was far from homogeneous in political terms. Colombia and Mexico continued to be governed by neoliberal-conservative regimes closely aligned with the United States. A second bloc of center-left, social-liberal (Brazil and Uruguay) or left-wing populist governments (Argentina and Nicaragua) exercised some autonomy from the United States and offered qualified state support for their local bourgeoisies. And a third bloc (Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador) oscillated between popular nationalism, anti-imperialism, and neo-developmentalism, entering into conflict periodically with both Washington and local oligarchies. The specificities of each case were, of course, determined by complex relations between popular movements, parties, the state, and progressive governments themselves. A shifting blend of co-optation, symbolic reward, and the institutionalization of movements characterized, to different extents, all the progressive experiences of this era. Between 2013 and 2020, however, the political project of progressivism was largely exhausted and a shift to the right occurred in two dominant and interrelated ways. First, there were shifts to the right *within* progressive ruling parties and governments in response to the end of the commodities boom and declining state revenues. Second, progressive parties were defeated—either electorally or through extra-constitutional means—and various right-wing parties assumed national office in a number of countries. The new right in power, however, has lacked both the coherent project of political rule and the vision of economic development that defined the orthodox neoliberal right of the 1980s and 1990s. The international context has changed dramatically since, and the new right has insufficient ideological, political, and economic bearings to effectively navigate the new terrain.

A second argument of this book is that, at the economic level, few signs are evident of genuine democratic advances having been made at the high mark of progressivism in the political realm. Progressive governments of various stripes failed to translate their political momentum into a transformation of class structures or improvement of Latin America's subordinate position within the international division of labor. Indeed, the latter worsened in several respects as the move to primary exports and away from industrialization advanced apace. Center-left governments, such as those in Brazil and Argentina in the mid-2000s, modestly broke with orthodox neoliberalism in key respects, while leaving other facets of that mode of

accumulation in place. In more radical experiments, such as those in Bolivia and Venezuela, more significant confrontations with neoliberal orthodoxy were partially inaugurated, but rarely developed to fruition. The high period of progressivism accompanied a commodities boom between 2003 and 2011, and the concomitant intensification of extractive capitalism in the region partially accounted for the almost uniformly high rates of economic growth and increases in state revenues. Rents from mining, agro-industry, and natural gas and oil extraction were directed by progressive governments toward targeted antipoverty programs, improving the lives of the most impoverished, while employment rates improved and domestic consumption increased. Poverty fell (in select cases, dramatically) and income inequality—in the most unequal region of the world, it should be stressed—was slightly reduced. Basic social services in health and education were improved, as was infrastructure in marginal urban neighborhoods and impoverished rural areas. These gains, however, were generally contingent on a favorable international economic environment, and they have receded dramatically as the global crisis of capitalism that began in 2007–2008 hit Latin America sharply a few years later. Across the period of the commodities boom and the subsequent era of declining growth and state austerity—problems amplified dramatically through the multipronged crisis of COVID-19 beginning at the outset of 2020—the economics and politics of the region have been deeply affected by imperial strategies of both the United States and, to an increasing extent, China. The high period of progressive hegemony witnessed attempts to forge regional integration projects that would counter the historic domination of the region by the United States, but these efforts have been largely undermined by the economic and political crises that have accelerated since 2013, and in addition the new bilateral ties China has with various Latin American countries are deeply asymmetrical.

The third argument of this book is that, at the ideological level, on the critical Latin American left we have witnessed a shift from an overarching anti-neoliberal consensus in the 1990s to a much more complex field of debate early in the twenty-first century, with a rough schematic line dividing those currents of thought more favorable to progressive governments from those more critical of them. The new divisions pivot on the political weight in different left traditions allotted to party and government hegemony versus subaltern autonomy, as well as along a series of divisive strategic questions: the socioeconomic question (post-neoliberalism, neo-developmentalism, and anti-capitalism); the economic-environmental question (extractivism

and dependency); the question of the state and democracy (populism, clientelism, transformism, and passive revolution); and the question of cultural diversity (plurinationalism and postcoloniality). Against this backdrop, we propose the Gramscian concept of passive revolution as the most fruitful lens through which to understand the intricacies of Latin American progressivism early in this century. We argue that a series of passive revolutions have unfolded, and are in some cases still unfolding, in countries with progressive governments in office. Specifically, to say that across these cases, with all their specificities, the era of progressivism has been an era of passive revolutions, is to say that there has been a combination of transformation and conservation of sociopolitical relations of domination directed from the state in an effort to absorb and de-escalate class struggle from below. There has also been a recomposition of modes of capitalist accumulation through socioeconomic reforms that have benefited the subaltern classes but that have simultaneously been designed for their demobilization and even control from above. Far-reaching change has frequently occurred in the ideological composition of the personnel occupying the state machinery, with changes to the modalities of political domination. However, these events have not been accompanied by parallel transformation of the underlying property relations and class structures of the relevant societies.

*Structure*

The book is organized into three chapters. In the first chapter, we propose a periodization of the complex relations among class struggles, progressivisms, lefts, and popular movements from the 1990s to the present. We stress, in the first instance, plebeian eruption, those movements and resistances that fractured neoliberal hegemony and the Washington consensus. Next, we discuss the ascent of progressive governments—ranging from the center-left to the national-popular and anti-imperialist—beginning in 1998 with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. The second half of the first decade of the current century appears as a "golden age" of progressivisms, of the Bolivarian experience and of a partial redistribution of the revenue from exports through diverse frameworks of state capitalism. Finally, we emphasize the political ebb of the "pink tide," the authoritarian drifts, the formation of new castes in power, the tensions between progressive governments and popular movements, and the return of right-wing forces beginning in

2013—a period "in tension" that also can be characterized by new dynamics of struggle and collective action, coming from conservative sectors of society as well as from antagonistic or even emancipatory social movements.

In the second chapter, we analyze the political economy of the Latin American left, bringing together in complex ways the rhythms of capitalist accumulation and crisis in the region, with the international dynamic of the world market and the geopolitical maneuvers of both American and Chinese imperialism in the twenty-first century. The chapter surveys the ascent, the consolidation, and finally the crisis of neoliberalism in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s, the boom in primary commodity prices and the consolidation of the electoral left between 2003 and 2011, and the economic and political repercussions of the latest crisis of global capitalism—the great slump of 2008—which began to affect Latin America seriously in 2012. The chapter explains the dialectical relationship between political and economic temporalities in Latin America over the last few decades, emphasizing ruptures and continuities in the region's political economy during the several phases of progressive rule. It also maps the multiple attempts made to forge regional integration projects relatively free from the historic domination of the United States.

In the third chapter, we analyze intellectual debates on the Latin American left over this historical period, and in particular since the establishment of progressive governments in office. We outline the general coordinates of the debate and review its principal arguments from the distinct perspectives of the national-popular, populism, anti-capitalism, autonomism-libertarianism, environmentalism, and postcolonialism. We highlight a theoretical-political tension in the background, on the antipodes of the debate, between a tendency oriented toward hegemony and another toward autonomy, between the defense of initiatives from above, from the state, on the basis of multiclass alliances, and through limited and measured reforms, and the criticism of this perspective from a vantage point emphasizing agency from below and the necessity of anti-systemic radicalism.

Finally, the book ends with some conclusions that seek to order and summarize the main ideas of the book and open windows into the future, particularly in the new context of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

We hope that our interpretation stimulates further analysis and critical assessment of the political experiences that disrupted the neoliberal order in Latin America and represented a watershed moment in history, the consequences of

which live on, and about which we need to reflect. The intellectual and political stakes could not be higher. The right—including the extreme-right—is in ascendance in the region, and in order to understand and to resist this phenomenon, it is necessary to evaluate as soberly and thoroughly as possible how the internal contradictions of the preceding era of progressive hegemony helped to make the right-wing resurgence possible.

# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

1. See, for example, Aloizio Mercadante and Marcelo Zero, eds., *Gobiernos del PT: Un legado para el futuro* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO-Fundação Perseu Abramo-Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2018); Fander Falconi, "¿Qué significa ser progresista hoy?," *Nodal*, August 25, 2018, http://www.nodal.am/2018/03/significa-progresista-hoy-fander-falconi-especial-nodal/. Incidentally, Falconi never uses the word "left" in his article, but instead points to the necessity of participatory democracy as being the basis of a radical republicanism; Alfredo Serrano Mansilla, "El nuevo progresismo latinoamericano," *La Jornada* (Mexico), April 28, 2018.

## CHAPTER 1. **Conflict, Blood, and Hope**

1. See, for example, Gustavo Carlos Guevara, ed., *Sobre las revoluciones latinoamericanas del siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Newen Mapu, 2017); Fernando Mires, *La rebelión permanente: Las revoluciones sociales en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI editores, 2001); and Alan Knight, *Revolución, democracia y populismo en América Latina* (Santiago: Centro de Estudios Bicentenario y Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2005).

2. Michael Löwy, *El marxismo en América Latina: Antología desde 1909 hasta nuestros días* (Santiago: LOM, 2007).

3. For collective reflection on this theme, see, among others, GESP, ed., *Movimientos sociales y poder popular en Chile: Retrospectivas y proyecciones políticas de la izquierda latinoamericana* (Santiago: Tiempo robado editoras, 2015); Miguel Mazzeo, *El sueño de una cosa (introducción al poder popular)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial El Colectivo, 2007); and, for a work centered on the Chilean experience, Franck Gaudichaud, *Chile 1970–1973: Mil días que estremecieron al mundo: Poder popular, cordones industriales y socialismo durante el gobierno de Salvador Allende* (Santiago: LOM, 2016).

4. James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, eds., *The Class Struggle in Latin America: Making History Today*, Critical Development Studies (London: Routledge, 2017).

5. Examples of excessive optimism include multiple statements by Noam Chomsky and some of the writings of Tariq Ali, notably *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* (London: Verso, 2006).