

Latin America Confronts the Challenge of Globalization

A Burdensome Inheritance

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The American continent was the first region to be integrated into newborn global capitalism and to be shaped into a periphery of the European Atlantic centers, themselves still undergoing formation. That shaping was a process of unparalleled brutality. The English, just as they did in Australia and New Zealand, proceeded immediately to the total genocide of the Indians. The Spaniards reduced them to a state of virtual slavery that, despite its catastrophic demographic effects, did not efface the Indian presence. Both, along with the Portuguese and the French, finished shaping the continent with the slave trade. The exploitation of this first periphery of historical capitalism was based on setting up a system of production to export agricultural (sugar, cotton) and mineral products.

Independence, when gained by the local white ruling classes, did not change that setup. Latin America (with today a mere 8.4 percent of world population), as well as Africa, together have small populations (relative to East, South, and Southeast Asia) but fabulously rich natural resources (in mineral deposits and potentially arable land). For that reason those regions were doomed to remain subject to systematic grand-scale pillage, exclusively for purposes of capital accumulation in the dominant centers—Europe and the United States.

Of course, the political and social forms established to this end have evolved over the centuries; but at each stage, down to the present day, their adaptations always serve that purpose. In the nineteenth century the integration of Latin America into the world capitalist system was based in part on the exploitation of its peonized peasants. They were subjugated to a regime of brutality perpetrated directly by the biggest agrarian landowners, and also their exploitation in mines by the

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foremost American and European mining companies. The Porfirio Diaz system, in Mexico, was one of its finest exemplars.

In the twentieth century the deepening of this integration resulted in the “modernization” of poverty. The exodus from the countryside accelerated, both earlier and more striking in Latin America than in Asia or Africa, replacing the earlier forms of rural poverty with the modern world of urban “favellas.” Alongside this development, political control over the masses was also “modernized” with the imposition of fascistic dictatorships (abolition of electoral democracy, outlawing of political parties and trade unions, specialized police services—with “modernized” investigative techniques—with the extra-legal authority to arrest, torture, and “disappear” any real or potential oppositionist). These dictatorships served the local reactionary coalitions (latifundiary landlords, compradore bourgeoisies, and middle classes profiting from this mode of “lumpen development”) and of the dominant foreign capital, that of the United States.

To this day the continent retains the stigmata of the brutal super-exploitation it has been subjected to. Social inequalities are even more extreme there than elsewhere. Brazil is a rich country (for example, the ratio of arable land to population is seventeen times compared to China) where only the poor can be seen, while China is a poor country where extreme poverty is much less visible. But in Brazil, as a consequence of its early and deep peripheral-capitalist development, merely 10 percent of the population is still in the countryside: poverty has become urban. In Venezuela, petroleum has completely destroyed both the economy and society: there is neither agriculture nor industry, and everything is imported. The very rich and the very poor live—or survive—only from oil rents.

In these conditions, reconstructing an agriculture able to feed the population adequately, as well as the constructing coherent and efficacious industrial systems, requires the inception of specific long-range policies that will certainly differ from what one can imagine for Asia or Africa.

Some Remarkable Revolutionary Gains

Likewise, there is a visible contrast between the consistent gains won by popular struggles in South America over the past thirty years and the absence of any such gains in Asia (except for China, Taiwan, and South Korea) or anywhere in Africa.

These gains originated when the 1960s dictatorships were routed by enormous popular urban movements. Beginning in Brazil with the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and deepened by that of Lula (2003), along with the first electoral success of Chavez in Venezuela (1999), the demand for democracy is incontestably advancing in Latin America. This demand no longer involves merely a few segments of the middle classes—it is that of the great majority of the urban and rural working classes. It has allowed electoral successes in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Uruguay (all of which, in ancient and modern history, constitute the exception and not the rule!) that have brought into governments a new generation of leaders whose progressive political cultures have nothing in common with those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A generation of leaders who have dared to call into question the reactionary economic and social policies of neoliberalism—at least in internal affairs—although unfortunately without (and there they reach their limits) also calling into question and modifying the way in which those countries are emplaced within global capitalism.

Major positive improvements have been incontestably established: inception of the renovation of democratic political management (such as participatory budgeting and the right to recall officials via referendum), corrective social policies (but mainly by redistribution rather than through new forms of productive activity), and lastly, recognition of the multinational nature of the Andean countries.

These established gains combine with the attempts of Latin America to free itself from U.S. political tutelage—as formulated in the Monroe Doctrine—without, alas, any reduction in the continent's economic dependency. The Organization of American States—Washington's "Colonial Ministry"—has been a lame duck since the formation of ALBA (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) and CELAC (the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) in 2011, which groups all the continent's states, excepting the United States and Canada. Mexico—in its subjection to the requirements of the integrated North American market—has thereby been committing what I have dared to term a "national suicide" that can be overcome only through a great popular and national revolution like that of the decade of 1910–1920.

Nevertheless, these initial gains have evident limitations: the continent not only remains committed overall to primary production (still accounting for 75 percent of its current exports while

Asia—especially China—is speedily progressing in its industrialization and successfully competing in the export of manufactured goods) but is even showing, in the “extractionist model,” a return to the economic dominance of primary (plantation and mineral) products. The recent conjunctural success of primary exports, which has allowed for the liquidation of massive foreign indebtedness, is nourishing a dangerous illusion: the illusion that it is possible to maintain social and political progress without an escape from the prevailing system of globalization.

The continent’s gains, in their limits and contradictions, are a challenge to current progressive social thought. These advances have resulted from a powerful people’s political movement that has broken away from the old forms of struggle—both those led by communist or populist political parties, as well as the 1960s’ armed struggle experiment. In response I have put forward an analytical framework, of which I merely restate here the broad outline. I speak of a “proletarianization that is simultaneously both generalized and quite extremely segmented.” It is indeed a proletarianization, in the sense that all workers (in both formal and informal sectors) have nothing to sell other than their labor power including, as the case may be, their intellectual capacities. The segmentation itself is by and large the result of systematic strategies carried out by the generalized monopolies that control the overall economic system, the orientation of technological research and invention, and political power. Moreover a military guarantee for permanence of narrowly restricted control by the imperialist (United States-EU-Japan) triad’s generalized monopolies is sought for through a geostrategic deployment over the whole planet of the armed forces of the United States and its subaltern allies (NATO and Japan). This analysis poses itself in contradiction to Hardt and Negri’s, whose exaggerated emphasis on the scope of the “liberating effects” of the “multitude’s” (a flabby word meant to conceal proletarianization) resistance struggles I have criticized, as well as their erroneous judgment of Washington’s policies whose military projects, according to them, have already “failed”—even though, in my opinion, the U.S. foreign-policy establishment has absolutely not given up on their continuation (and Hillary Clinton, if elected President in 2016, will pursue them desperately).

Formidable Challenges to Overcome

The advances of the past thirty years have established favorable conditions for their continuation and deepening. But certain conditions

are needed for this to become a reality. I give a synthetic view of their nature with my proposal for “sovereign projects linking the building of coherent modern industrial systems, the reconstruction of agriculture and of rural life, consolidation of social progress, and openness to the invention of an endlessly progressing democratization.” [source for this quote?] My emphasis on national sovereignty—which we must understand as linked to sovereignty of the working classes, and never view as unconnected to it—is likewise in contradiction to Negri’s discourse that treats as outdated both any affirmation of the nation and any aim of constructing a multi-centric world order. In my opinion, not just are these goals far from “outdated,” they are not yet obsolete! Imagining that such is the case renders the formulation of an effective stage-by-stage strategy impossible.

The reconstruction of agriculture—oriented toward the consolidation of nutritional sovereignty—will necessitate the formulation of policies, which will differ among countries. The reality that 80 percent (or more) of the population lives in cities renders illusory the notion of a possible “return to the land” by pauperized urban workers. We must look to a way of reconstruction very different from that which is still both possible and necessary in Asia and in Africa. This reconstruction nevertheless requires the abandonment of current policies based on huge farms that degrade the soil (the Argentine model, in particular). Neither in Mexico nor the Andean countries can reconstruction be based on the illusion of restoring the ancient Indian communities, which unmistakably cannot respond to future needs and have been disfigured by their subjugation to the requirements of peripheral lumpen development specific to their particular countries.

The construction of industrial systems that are modern and inner-directed (oriented toward the domestic mass market and only secondarily toward exports) can be imagined clearly for Brazil, perhaps for Argentina, and certainly for Mexico—should it succeed in escaping from the claws of North American integration. But present policies are far below the level needed for such construction, never going beyond the limits imposed by the ruling sectors of big national industrial and financial capital linked to the monopolies of the imperialist countries. Nationalizations/stateifications and active state interventions are unavoidable, at least for this first stage, opening then the way to the possible real and ongoing socialization of their administration.

In regard to the other countries of the continent, I find it hard to envisage much progress toward industrial construction without

systematic regional integration (which even now is scarcely advanced) nor even without building new solidarities on the scale of the Greater South (the three continents). China alone—but perhaps also some of the so-called “emerging” countries—might support some sweeping industrialization projects (in Venezuela, for example). But this would imply that Beijing recognize its interest in doing so, which is not the case. The latent complicity between Latin American power holders still staking their natural resources and a China needing access to those resources delays, for all those parties, recognition of the long-term requirements for a different perspective, one that in its turn requires different forms of “cooperation” than those currently operative.

And so we come back to the challenges confronting the “popular progressive movement,” in Latin America as elsewhere in the three continents: for its components, in struggle, to go beyond the individual specificity of their demands and to invent novel political forms for building unity-in-diversity.