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**The State in the Current Processes of Change in Latin America:
Complementary and Conflicting Transformation Projects in
Heterogeneous Societies**

During the decades of neoliberalism, the weakening of nation states (especially those of the global South, but most recently also of the North), has been a fundamental neoliberal strategy geared at making societies less democratic and thereby more vulnerable and helpless in the face of global markets. Under these conditions, in many of the debates of the Latin American left in recent years, the recovery of the state has been considered as a necessity for strengthening national sovereignty, for the recovery of the public good, and for the very possibility of any process of significant societal change. Without the material, symbolic, and institutional state resources, any attempt at societal change could be more easily halted and/or defeated by privileged national/international interests that would be adversely impacted. However, this leads to severe contradictions, given that these very institutional state frameworks have historically operated, in a fundamental sense, as instruments and structures for the reproduction of the existing relationships of colonial domination and exploitation.

In his classical formulation, James O'Connor (1973) stated that the liberal capitalist state is inherently penetrated by tensions and contradictions. It operates not only as an instrument of capital accumulation, but also has to guarantee the legitimation of capitalist society. This state complexity becomes even greater in the peripheral countries of the world system. Latin American states have been, and fundamentally continue to be, *monocultural colonial states* in heterogeneous and pluricultural societies.¹ To this historical heritage has been added decades of neoliberal policies geared towards the dismantling of the state. By giving full priority to the demands of accumulation over democratic legitimacy, these states were

largely privatised and placed directly at the service of capital. Additionally, to different degrees, these states have been characterised as being inefficient, clientelistic, infiltrated with corruption, and, even in the best of cases, as having weak representative democracies that have excluded large proportions of the population. This raises important questions in relation to the role these states could play in enabling social change in Latin American societies. Are these states simply obstacles to change, or can they in some way (partially) further a transformative agenda?

In this text, these contradictions and tensions will be explored in the context of the current processes of change in the three South American countries with the most radical agendas for societal change, countries that have in recent years carried out ambitious constitutional transformations, namely Venezuela (1999), Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009).

1. The state in multiple and heterogeneous processes of change

The state's actions in the current processes of change in the continent are affected by strong and distinct tensions. The reflections made in this text about these tensions relate to three fundamental areas: (a) to the complex historical structural heterogeneity² of these societies; (b) to the heterogeneity and *internal* contradictions of states that do not constitute unitary bodies, but rather complex territories in dispute; and (c) to the co-presence of various transformation logics and partially complementary, partially contradictory projects for change that are being simultaneously played out in these political processes. All this must be seen in the context of profound transformations in global patterns of accumulation and hegemonic structures.

Revolutionary transformational projects identified with socialism over the past two centuries were supported by theories of progress, by faith in the ascending linearity of historical development, and the claim that it was possible to guide the whole of society in one direction, towards a pre-defined horizon, the general attributes of which were considered to be known. The necessity of a vanguard capable of foreshadowing future society was a part of the same idea of revolution. Although the capitalist societies that were being confronted were recognised as complex and heterogeneous, the

notion of a principal contradiction (capital/labour or bourgeoisie/proletariat) led to an attempt to articulate all the contradictions of society and the direction of their processes of transformation around a single main axis. Moreover, these projects on the whole operated within the pattern of Western civilisation and of unlimited confidence in progress.

The current worldwide processes of social transformation face radically different historical contexts. The dominant logic of modern politics has suffered an implosion as a result of the crisis of Western monocultural modernity and its idea of progress. This has become particularly visible in South American politics over the last decades and is increasingly evident both in the impossibility of endless growth on a planet whose limited carrying capacity has been exceeded, and by the strong presence of other societal options that radically deny the 'end of history' and reject the belief in liberal capitalist society as the only possible historical option, as the inevitable destiny of all humankind.

Today's processes, projects, and imaginaries of change cannot be reduced to any single unitary logic. These are processes, trends, and projects of social transformation that operate simultaneously, sometimes complementarily and at other times in conflict and even with significant contradictions.

This internal heterogeneity of the processes of change has been conceptualised in many ways. According to Arturo Escobar: "the current conjuncture can be said to be defined by two processes: the crisis of the neoliberal model of the past three decades; and the crisis of the project of bringing about modernity in the continent since the Conquest" (Escobar 2010: 3). According to this view, the contemporary transformations move beyond the left-right continuum in which the politics of the Western world have operated in the last two centuries. Escobar considers that the proposal by Walter D. Mignolo is a more apt formulation of these political forms. Mignolo speaks of "'the left, the right, and the decolonial', opening up the political spectrum beyond Eurocentric frameworks. The transformations involve not only a turn to the left, but a decolonial turn" (Escobar 2010: 6).

According to Raúl Zibechi, in Latin America today, "political and social reality is not only shaped by a single scenario but by three of them": the struggle to overcome the dominance of the United States, to overcome capitalism, and to overcome development (Zibechi 2010, translation AN/SN).

This involves the simultaneous presence of anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist tendencies and the search for alternatives to development. It would make sense to add at least a fourth scenario or direction for societal change. This would refer to national-popular projects that give priority to industrialisation, democratisation, inclusion, and redistribution, which could together be characterised as the pending tasks of the project of establishing national democratic states, an aspiration that is still operative in these societies. It is not a question of fully complementary or necessarily mutually exclusive historical alternatives or future projects, but of tendencies and imaginaries that are closely intertwined in the reality of the current political confrontations.

As Escobar indicates, the terms used for the current processes of change illustrate this extraordinary complexity: “Socialismo del siglo XXI [21st century socialism], plurinationality, interculturality, direct and substantive democracy, *revolucion ciudadana*, [citizens revolution] endogenous development centered on the *buen vivir* [good life] of the people, territorial and cultural autonomy, and decolonial projects towards post-liberal societies” (Escobar 2010: 2, emphasis orig.).

These different projects condition the tensions and confrontations of these processes of change, shaping different central themes that in different ways express the current conflicts of their societies and the positioning of subjects and social organisations within these. These different projects for change are simultaneously present in public discourses and are in some ways articulated in the government proposals of these countries. However, at different junctures, one or another of these central axes may acquire special relevance or urgency. The effect of this is that at times certain processes and confrontations relating to the other dimensions are put on a back burner, and can thus lose visibility either in the public debate or in governmental priorities.

A major focus of the current political strife is built around the conflicts between the popular democratic processes, on the one hand, and the interests of privileged national and transnational sectors, on the other. These confrontations may be understood in the context of the classical opposition between left and right, or of popular national struggles against an exclusive social order. These agendas often appear associated with socialist horizons. In this national-popular logic the priorities are national sovereignty,

democratisation and the redistribution of wealth. This is associated with the idea of development, with a demand for a stronger state, and with key issues such as national control of the commons as well as struggles for land distribution and the pursuit of greater levels of equality.

In the decolonial logic the main priorities are plurinationality, the recognition of diversity, the sovereignty of indigenous people over their own territories, autonomy of peoples, communities and movements, judicial pluralism, the rejection of the developmental state and extractivism, as well as the recognition of the rights of Mother Earth. The struggle for decolonisation points towards a deep social transformation that questions not only capitalism but the dominant Western patterns of production and knowledge. This is best captured in the ideas of *vivir bien* or *buen vivir* (good living or living well) (Mamani 2010).

The future of these processes of change depends on whether these different logics of social transformation manage (or not) to articulate, retro-feed, or supplement each other. The political projects associated with the idea of socialism are not easily compatible with the historical projects of decolonisation: they correspond to different histories, theories, socio-political subjects, as well as different notions about a desirable future. On the part of those who defend the validity of a form of socialism, this requires a penetrating criticism of the experience of 20th century socialism and of the struggles of the Latin American left of the last century, in particular its limited confrontation with patriarchy, its monocultural or colonial character components, and its developmentalist, predatory conception of a better future. These different heritages can become complementary parts of the same heterogeneous, non-linear, plural and democratic process of social transformation only through complex negotiations, difficult processes of dialogue, alliance building, but above all, dynamics of reciprocal learning and reflexive self-questioning within each of these political/cultural traditions. The inevitable conflicts derived from this confrontation of priorities have to be dealt with by non-violent means.

If these various transformative logics (popular-national, socialist, decolonial) are politically constructed as contradictory or antagonistic, the result can only lead to the defeat of these projects of change, to the consolidation or strengthening of the historical forms of capitalistic domination, and to an accelerated deepening of the environmental crisis of the planet.

What does not seem probable is that, under the current conditions of the fracturing within the popular sectors, with their profound political and cultural heterogeneity, one of these projects might achieve hegemony over the whole of society.

The tensions between these logics or projects of change outlined above (popular-national, socialist, decolonial) are also present within the state itself, in the ideas and actions of those politicians leading these processes of change and in the claims and demands made of the government by the most diverse sectors of society. Likewise, these are tensions and perspectives which exist in different expressions in the popular classes. These diverse logics of transformation even operate within the same subjects and/or movements, giving priority to some dimensions over others, depending on the situation. These multiple demands addressed to the state cannot be realised simultaneously. They constitute sources of permanent tensions and conflicts and require constant negotiations. Thus, there are calls to recover the state, strengthen the state, democratise the state, decolonise the state, make the state an instrument of transformation, maintain the autonomy of the movements and organisations with regard to the state, ensure sovereign control of the commons and their use for the collective benefit, and confront extractivism an economy based on the export of unprocessed commodities.

2. Extractivism and modes of insertion in the global market

One of the issues around which these tensions have become more evident since the new constitutional texts have come into force has been that of extractivism and the modes of primary export insertion of these countries in the global economy. Throughout Latin America today many of the main popular struggles are related to the defence of territories against oil exploitation, fast expansion of single-crop farming (monocultures), and large-scale open-pit mining. These issues are particularly crucial in Ecuador and Bolivia, where the organised struggles of indigenous people and movements have played such a crucial role and where the constitutional texts or the laws that followed established the rights of nature, or Mother Earth, for the first time in history. Given the limits of the planet and the global envi-

ronmental crisis threatening the conditions for the reproduction of life, at least human life, it is evident that there is no possibility of any significant social transformation if alternatives to the predatory order of unlimited economic growth are not assumed as a central component.

As was pointed out at the beginning, the current processes of change in Latin America have occurred after decades of neoliberal policies, notably through privatisations, the reduction of the public sphere and the opening of economies to global markets. It was precisely the popular struggles against neoliberalism and their consequences (mobilisation against FTAA [ALCA] and other free trade agreements, overthrowing neoliberal presidents etc.), and the accumulated political capacity made possible by these disputes, that made the electoral victories of the current so-called 'progressive' or left-wing governments possible. However, this did not imply that the deep economic, political, and cultural transformations caused by neoliberalism ceased to be felt. These effects included more unequal societies, less solidarity, and less democracy; more unstable countries; more open economies and the weakening of productive processes directed at the internal market. This reinforced both the economic and political roles of the entrepreneurial sectors connected with primary export activities, finance, and, in general, the groups more directly associated with the external sector of these economies.

'Progressive' or left-wing governments are likewise in a very different global economic and geopolitical context from the years when CEPAL used to defend the need for import substitution. The political and economic tools available to them now are much more limited. New conditions have been created by neoliberal globalisation. Given the opening of the markets created by the new global institutions, such as the WTO and the multilateral and bilateral international free trade agreements, as well as the vast differences both in salaries and in the existing productivity in the world today (especially *vis-a-vis* China), the obstacles confronting any intent attempt to boost industrial politics, in particular in small countries with limited internal markets, are extraordinary. The steps taken towards productive regional integration have been hitherto clearly insufficient and tend to benefit large economies, especially Brazil.

The new accumulation patterns of capital have stressed the colonial forms of the international division of labour and the international divi-

sion of so-called ‘nature’. In this model of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2004), the roles of Africa and Latin America have been reaffirmed as suppliers of primary goods, of farm, energy, and mining *commodities*. The tendencies towards the deepening of extractivism present in the whole region have to be regarded within the context of these structural conditions of global capitalism that can be properly characterised as processes of re-colonising the planet.

All of this has acquired the shape of a new geoculture of the planet. The cultural patterns and social beliefs characteristic of a globalised individualist and consumer culture (‘possessive individualism’) spread by the global corporate culture industry, in particular from the United States, are a fundamental part of this logic of re-colonisation and have likewise become serious obstacles in the search for alternatives.

Any process of significant change in these societies necessarily requires profound ruptures with these forms of insertion in the world market, the consequences of which are not only economic. Without these ruptures the current colonial insertions will consolidate, strengthening the internal economic, political and cultural bases – as well as state structures – of this pattern of accumulation, creating even greater obstacles for anti-capitalism, and for progressive alternatives to development, as well as to the very possibility of decolonial transformations.

Several years after these governments were elected, (more than a decade in the case of Venezuela), it seems clear that there is a continuous reinforcing of extractivism and of the primary export logic. In this sense, there are no significant differences between the so-called ‘progressive’ or left-wing governments and the neoliberal governments. In almost all countries of Latin America, the share of primary goods in the total value of exports has increased in the last decade, in most cases significantly. With regard to the whole continent, the proportion of primary products in the total value of exports grew from 41.1% in 2002, to 52.9% in 2009 (CEPAL 2010: 105). This tendency has been evident even in Brazil, the most industrialised country in the continent, where the percentage of primary goods relative to the total value of exports increased from 47.4% in 2002 to 60.9% in 2009 (*ibid.*: 105).

The export of primary goods has become a direct source of relatively abundant public income, which could not be obtained through other means. The increasingly significant role of China in global geopolitics is contribu-

ting to the consolidation of this mode of insertion in the world market (Bridges 2009). Among other paradoxes concerning these South American political processes is the way in which an anti-imperialist discourse (i.e. that of the United States or the EU) is used to justify steps that tend to consolidate the subordination to another global capitalist power: China.

Trade between Latin America and China depends even more on primary products than trade with the United States and Europe: “Exports from Latin America to China are almost exclusively based on extraction and intensive use of natural resources. These are exported with very low or no processing as in the case of soya, fishmeal, grapes, sugar and copper. This tendency implies strong pressure on ecosystems, vacating natural resources of Latin American territory (farmland, biodiversity, water, fish resources and energy resources) and deteriorating the sovereignty of local communities over their natural resources and their territories and the services they supply (food, water, etc.). This is particularly irreversible in the case of mining” (Larrain et al. 2005: 47, translation AN/SN).

In the three countries, there is an important and growing distance between the discourses and the legal texts referring to the rights of nature and the critique of development, on the one hand, and the content of some of the main political and economic decisions, on the other hand.

Obviously, it is impossible to demand from the governments of Venezuela, Ecuador, or Bolivia that they close their wells, oil, and gas pipelines and stop exporting hydrocarbons overnight. However, if the target is to change the productive model based on extractivism, clear and effective decisions have to be taken today that are geared towards a *transition* to productive models that overcome extractivism. There have been very few signs in this respect so far. Furthermore, in all three countries the government discourse has taken an increasingly developmental and extractivist tone.

This distance between discourses, projects, norms, and laws, on the one hand, and some of the main political/economic decisions, on the other hand, has caused important confrontations in these three countries. A notorious example was the opposition in Bolivia to the opening of large extensions of the Amazon region for the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbons (Morales Ayma 2010), a decision which was taken almost simultaneously with the introduction of the *Law of Rights of Nature* in the

legislative assembly. The subsequent decisions of the Bolivian government, with regard to the construction of the motorway through the indigenous territory of Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécore (TIPNIS), in spite of the firm opposition of its indigenous inhabitants, have been even more conflictual. This project has produced deep divisions in Bolivian society, a very controversial national debate, and conflicting positions between popular movements and organisations with different visions in relation to what is at stake (Prada Alcoreza 2010a, 2010b; 2010c; Arkonada 2011; Toer/Montero 2012; Mamani Ramírez 2012).

In Ecuador the Mining Law, portrayed by indigenous and environmental organisations as directly breaching the spirit and the text of a constitution that grants rights to ‘nature’ for the first time in history (CONAIE 2009), is only one of many disputes that have occurred between the government of President Rafael Correa and indigenous and environmental organisations within the context of the pro-developmental policies which have characterised that government. In spite of the fact that Correa’s government had kept high levels of backing in opinion polls, there has been a deep break with the major indigenous and environmental organisations. Evidence of the extremity that this confrontation has reached is the *Manifesto of the Conference of Ecuador’s Social Movements for Democracy and Life* in August 2011, signed by a large number of indigenous, peasant, trade-union and women’s organisations of the whole country, in which it is alleged that “Correa’s project represents an authoritative and corrupt model of capitalist modernisation” (ABONG 2011).

Of all these countries, anti-developmental and decolonial disputes have less public presence in Venezuela. Accentuating the country’s century-old oil dependency, this product accounted for 95% of the total value of exports in the year 2010 (Banco Central de Venezuela 2011). This phenomenon is not just the result of the inevitable inertia caused by this historic centrality of oil in the economy, the political system, and the Venezuelan State, nor can it be explained as a result of a temporary statistical distortion caused by the high oil prices in the international market. It also corresponds to the productive model proposed as an indispensable condition to make 21st century socialism possible.

During the last decade, a sustained policy of investments and partnerships with international – state-owned and private – companies, both in

gas and oil, was carried out with the aim of considerably increasing production. According to official statistics of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Venezuela has 296 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, the largest in the world. Those reserves represent a quarter of the total reserves of the member countries of OPEC and 20% of the oil reserves of the whole planet (OPEC 2011: 11, 22). Furthermore, Venezuela also has two thirds of the total gas reserves in the whole of Latin America (ibid.: 23). The major parts part of these reserves are found in the Orinoco oil belt. According to *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA 2010: 92, translation AN/SN)*: “[T]he Orinoco oil belt is situated in the southern part of the Guárico, Anzoátegui and Monagas regions; forming a huge reservoir with a geographical area of approximately 55,000 sq.k, with superficial hydrocarbon-bearing sand covering about 12,000 sq.k. It contains accumulations of heavy crude and extra-heavy crude oil with an average gravity of 8.6° API.”

Agreements were entered into for the quantification and certification of the reserves of the Orinoco belt (ibid.: 93) with 28 companies from 21 countries, including Russia, China, the United States, France, Japan, Brazil, Spain, Iran, India, Norway, and South Africa. In the Strategic Plans for Gas Development, apart from investments by US corporations, there were investments by corporations from Italy (ENI) and Norway (STATOIL) (see PDVSA n/y).

Official announcements with regard to the level of production foreseen for the future have changed over time. According to President Hugo Chávez, Venezuela will double its production between 2011 and 2021 and will be able to produce six million barrels of crude oil a day. “We estimate a daily production of six million 120 thousand barrels a day by 2021 [...] The price of this barrel will be about 200 dollars,” which will be used for the purpose of sustaining “the development of a world power, namely, the Venezuela motherland” (RNV 2011, translation AN/SN). In January 2012, the president declared that a daily production of 10 million barrels would be achieved by “around 2030” (Durand 2012). In order to accomplish this increase in production, a large proportion of the national territory has been opened for oil and gas exploitation, including huge extensions of the territorial sea (Red Alerta Petrolera-Orinoco Oilwatch 2005). Bearing in mind the extraordinary magnitude of reserves, the planned increase in the scale

of production, and the complex technology required to extract these heavy-crude and extra-heavy oils and oil from the hydrocarbon-bearing sands of the Orinoco belt, massive investments by transnational corporations from all over the world have been planned in the form of joint ventures with the state owned PDVSA. The characteristics of these crude oils inevitably imply that their exploitation will have a greater environmental and socio-cultural impact than that involved in the exploitation of traditional lighter crude oils.

The centrality given to hydrocarbon in the production model of the country is expressly found in the first national plan for development, conceived as a project leading to socialism: the *Simón Bolívar National Project* (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, Presidencia 2007). One of the seven central themes or targets defining this development project is to make Venezuela a “world energy power”. According to this project: “[O]il will continue to be decisive in gaining financial resources from abroad, in generating productive internal investments, in meeting the country’s own needs for energy, and in consolidating the Socialist Productive Model” (ibid.).

The politics relating to the internal market are an expression of the fundamental continuity in the development model and energy pattern based on oil. A litre of ‘ecological’ gasoline with the highest octane level is sold in Venezuela at a price of between two and three cents (US\$). This massive subsidy has inevitably promoted a sustained increase in the consumption of hydrocarbon in the country, thus reinforcing energy waste and a rentist culture.

The most significant foreign investments of recent years have been Chinese. In response to the unquenchable thirst of the Chinese economy for a reliable and ever increasing supply of hydrocarbons, Rafael Ramírez, the Minister of Energy and Petroleum, announced that the Venezuelan government had signed contracts in the sum of US\$ 32 billion, backed-up by future oil transfers until the credit is cancelled (Aporrea 2011).

In September 2010 the law authorising the most important of these contracts was published. It is a credit line for 10 years from China to Venezuela for a total of US\$ 20 billion, half of which would be in Chinese yuans renmimbi. Venezuela agreed to supply China with no less than 200,000 and 250,000 barrels of oil every day for the first two years and thereafter with no less than 300,000 barrels daily until the loan has been paid. Neither

the price of the oil barrel nor the interest rate of the loan are specified in the contract. The latter “will be jointly determined by the lender and the borrower, based on direct negotiations and market principles” (Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2010, translation AN/SN). These futures sales used to finance current expenses or investments not only consolidate a long term dependency on oil, but also generate structural demands for increased levels of production over time, if only to keep the same levels of fiscal income.

President Hugo Chávez talks about this relationship with China in the following terms: “I think that China is showing to the world that it will be the first world power. This is good for the world because it is becoming a great world power without knocking down, invading or blocking anybody, without knocking down peoples or imposing leonine conditions: without breaching the sovereignty of the peoples. With modesty, we say, all the oil that China will need for its growth and consolidation as a great world power and to continue to improve the living conditions of its people, is here, not only crude oil but also iron” (Venezolana de Televisión 2010).

3. Processes of change in democracy

One of the fundamental challenges of the current processes of change consists of the demands for deep cultural transformations and the establishment of new state forms and institutions that can articulate these plural societies within the current national territorial limits. These frontiers, which completely ignore previous history and the entire socio-cultural reality that existed before the arrival of the colonisers, have been assumed as fixed by the governments of these three countries. The integrity of these national territories has only been questioned by right wing opposition movements when they have found it convenient to use separatist threats as a political weapon. This implies that the processes of change have to operate within the deep *historical structural heterogeneity*² existing within these national territories. This is what the ideas of plurinationality, interculturalism, and decolonialism point to (Walsh 2008).

These new/other political-cultural forms will be possible only if built democratically. This is so both for pragmatic political reasons and for much

more fundamental reasons, related to the type of future society desired. The current processes of change in the continent have been carried out by means of elections. This implies that the continuity of these governments is only possible through the preservation of political legitimacy and majority electoral support (unless a decision is made to interrupt the current constitutional frameworks, something that seems not to be on the agenda). In this context, public policies face the challenge of contributing to the transformation of the beliefs and shared common sense of majorities without distancing themselves a great deal from that shared common sense, since that would lead to electoral defeats.

However, beyond electoral support, history has taught us what happens when a state tries to impose by force, against the will of large sectors of the population, political transformations and radical reorganisations of society. Well known are the dramatic impacts of the authoritarian imposition of the utopian collectivisation of the Soviet farms or of the Cultural Revolution in China. These not only had extraordinarily high human costs but contributed to the loss of legitimacy of the revolutionary projects, through which the possibility of continuing the processes of transformation towards a post-capitalist society was severely undermined. There are severe limits to the actions that can be undertaken by the state in its quest to transform society. Pretending to substitute the complex and necessarily slow transformations and intercultural negotiations of deeply heterogeneous societies with the raw use of state power has well known results. Perhaps, this is one of the fundamental lessons of the revolutionary processes of the last century. The state, assumed as the subject or principal agent of transformation, finally imposes authoritarianism, thereby undermining the possibilities for building a democratic society.

4. An exceptional historic situation

Latin America is at an extraordinary and hardly repeatable historic juncture. The so-called 'progressive' and left governments were elected as a result of prolonged processes of broad-based struggles and popular mobilisations for democracy and against neoliberalism, struggles in which indigenous organisations played a key role. These are not right-wing govern-

ments, in spite of the existing continuity in some areas of public policies (in particular in the economic model of exporting unprocessed commodities) and in spite of the less than democratic intolerance in which they reply to their critics. But above all, and beyond the extraordinary importance that the head of state has in each of these cases, they are not monolithic governments. They are governments and states in dispute. Owing to their own origin and composition, they are governments crossed by tensions, contradictions, and a multiplicity of tendencies. The popular, peasant, and indigenous organisations – that contributed through their mobilizations to the election of these governments and are now disappointed with their policies – are now challenged to identify these tendencies and to look for allies in order to strengthen the transforming trends and to stop those that boost monocultural developmentalism. However, total confrontation with these governments, as if they were nothing more than a continuation of the policies and basic orientations of previous governments, can only contribute to reducing the capacity to influence their policies.

Today, the obstacles confronted in the struggle for the rights of the indigenous peoples and the rights of nature are not only found in governments and in public policies. As argued in this text, the culture of these societies is deeply heterogeneous. In spite of the results of the referenda approving the new constitution, the ideas of *sumak kawsay* and *suma qamaña* (with all their potential as an alternative civilization) cannot be assumed today to express a common understanding shared by the majority of the inhabitants of these countries. Five centuries of colonialism and three decades of neoliberalism have left deep footprints. The corporate media continues to play a fundamental role in the reproduction of possessive individualism, identifying good living with US patterns of material consumption. Many sectors of the excluded population, without access to the basic material conditions necessary for a dignified life, demand development, employment, public health programmes, education, and social security from these governments. Nor are the contradictions between the aspirations of indigenous people and government policies clear-cut and simple. This is particularly the case when the social programmes of these governments reach the bases of the indigenous organizations, improving their everyday lives, and contribute to creating a split between the base and the more politicised and demanding leadership of these organizations in terms

of how they view the government. These contradictions and tensions also take place within indigenous peoples and communities. These are also heterogeneous and have been deeply impacted by colonial history. If the leadership of the organisations does not identify these tensions within their own ranks, the door is open for the welfare politics of the governments (even in the case of Venezuela, where these are expressly modernising and colonising policies) to undermine the bases of such organisations.

There are some severe shortcomings, limitations, and even serious setbacks in these processes of change that can be attributed to the inertia of State institutions, bureaucratic and political resistance taking place within the State, as well as to the limited capacity (and at times, lack of political will) of the leaders of these processes in the difficult tasks of exploring and linking the complex relationships between immediate administrative and social demands, on the one hand, and the necessity of taking steps in the direction of productive models beyond extractivism and development, on the other.

However, the challenges faced are not only found in the need to build political and social consensus, in the lack of political will of the government, or in the structural limitations that the dominant pattern of accumulation imposes. Severe shortcomings both theoretical and in terms of the type of political and social organisations and instruments of democratic, collective public administration appropriate for the desired transformations, are being confronted. There is much more clarity over what needs to be rejected than there is in relation to the characteristics of the alternative society.

The criticism of development – as an attempt to reorganise and transform peripheral societies in the capitalist-colonial-world-system along the path taken by metropolitan societies – has been made with rigour and depth (Escobar 2007). There are multiple community, local and regional experiences that illustrate that there are ways to live and produce and relate to ‘nature’ that are ‘really existing’ alternatives to development. However, there is little experience or theoretical and conceptual elaboration at hand with regard to the public policies required to deal with the contradictions faced in the process of building alternatives to developmentalism and extractivism. There is a lack of concrete policy proposals of transition that are politically feasible in the short term, and which are capable of leading

these societies from development/extractivism to ‘beyond development’. These cannot be invented. They can only arise from multiple, diverse, collective experiences. The Ministries of economics, finance, planning, and the and the so-called ‘development plans’, even if they are called ‘good life plans’ (SENPLADES 2009), do not constitute the most appropriate instruments for these novel requirements. These planning and governing tools are not neutral. They are the product of a type of state conceived after the end of the Second World War as being an instrument for the ‘development’ of the then called Third World, according to the monocultural patterns of the West. It is not possible to centrally ‘plan’ what necessarily would have to be an open process of plural and democratic experimentation based on the acknowledgement of the structural heterogeneity of these societies and on the fact that the old assurances about the characteristics of the society of the future have ceased to exist. The alternative society cannot be technocratically designed or budgeted.

There is much at stake in these processes, not only for Latin America, but in terms of the possibility of advancing alternatives to the predatory logic that is undermining the foundations of life in the planet. In spite of their profound contradictions, these Latin American processes³ are where it is possible to find the most vigorous alternatives to the civilisation pattern in crisis. The reversal of these processes would constitute a serious regression for anti-capitalist struggles throughout the world.

Translation by Aida Nelson and Stuart E. Nelson

- 1 When I speak of monocultural colonial states, I mean the Latin American states that both during colonial and republican times have colonised these profoundly heterogeneous societies (different peoples, languages, modes of relating to ‘nature’, etc.). These have – with varying levels of success – attempted to impose a colonial monoculture: one valid form of knowledge, one language, unique forms of property, a unitary legal system, an official religion, a single way of belonging, inclusion and participation (unique model of citizenship).
- 2 The concept of historical structural heterogeneity was formulated by Aníbal Quijano as part of his critique of Eurocentric and colonial patterns of knowledge that remain hegemonic in contemporary social sciences. With this category, he intends to dismantle the binary categories that presuppose a certain internal homogeneity of each of the parts: primitive/civilised; traditional/modern; oriental/western. According to Quijano, historical, structural heterogeneity is a feature of “all the realms of social existence”. There are no homogeneous societies. “That

which is really notable in the whole of societal structure is that elements, experiences and products, historically interrupted, varying, distant and heterogeneous, are able to join together in spite of their inconsistencies and their conflicts, in the common framework that binds them in a joint structure.” Given its colonial historical experience, it is impossible to understand Latin American societies without a recognition of this historical structural heterogeneity, especially those countries in which the indigenous presence and slavery have been more pronounced (Quijano 2000, translation AN/SN).

- 3 Throughout the text, references to the ‘processes of change’ in the three cases analysed always refer to the societal processes of transformation, not only to the government’s project. Thus the continuation and/or deepening of the processes of transformation does not necessarily mean the continuation of the current heads of state or even of their political parties.

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Abstracts

This paper explores the main tensions and contradictions within the current processes of change in three South American countries: Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. These tensions are seen as a consequence of: (a) the complex historical structural heterogeneity of these societies; (b) con-tradictions within the government and the state, which cannot be seen as homogeneous, but as fields of struggle, and (c) the co-presence, in a partially contradictory and partially complementary form of diverse projects of social transformation. These projects are mainly, but not only, 21st Century Socialism, decolonial projects (the indigenous notion of the good life), and national-popular projects. The current political confron-

tations these governments face, not from the right wing opposition but from social movements and organisations that were previously part of their supporters, have to be seen as internal contradictions within the processes of political change, and as an expression of the conflicting and sometimes contradictory visions of the future and current demands of different popular sectors of these heterogeneous societies.

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die zentralen Spannungen und Widersprüche in den aktuellen Transformationsprozessen der drei lateinamerikanischen Länder Bolivien, Ecuador und Venezuela. Diese Spannungen werden interpretiert als Konsequenz (a) der komplexen historisch-strukturellen Heterogenität dieser Gesellschaften; (b) der Widersprüche innerhalb der Regierungen und Staatsapparate, die nicht als homogen angesehen werden können, sondern als Terrain von sozialen Kämpfen; und (c) der Koexistenz von teilweise widersprüchlichen und teilweise sich ergänzenden unterschiedlichen Projekten sozialer Transformation. Bei diesen Projekten handelt es sich vor allem, aber nicht ausschließlich, um Projekte eines Sozialismus des 21. Jahrhunderts, um dekolonisierende Projekte (die indigene Vorstellung des Guten Lebens) und um national-populare Projekte. Widerstand erfahren diese Regierungen derzeit nicht von rechtsgerichteten Gruppierungen, sondern von denjenigen sozialen Bewegungen und Organisationen, von denen sie vormals unterstützt wurden. Diese Konflikte werden als innere Widersprüche des politischen Transformationsprozesses sowie als Ausdruck von unterschiedlichen Zukunftsvisionen und aktuellen Forderungen von unterschiedlichen Gesellschaftsgruppierungen innerhalb einer heterogenen Gesellschaft interpretiert.

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