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## **Socioecological Transformations**

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**BIRGIT DAIBER**

**Contradictory Transitional Experiences of Progressive Governments in Latin America: The Context of this Special Issue**

In eight Latin American countries (plus Cuba) the left is currently in government, and the anti-capitalist dynamic still seems to be strong. Stronger still, however, is the compulsion to follow the logic of capitalist development. Starting in the nineties – after a long period of neoliberal regimes which caused the destruction of public institutions, state functions and entire economies – the left in governments implemented relevant policies of change, such as the process of nationalisation of resource industries in Venezuela and Bolivia, the reduction of external debt and the development of a new domestic financial architecture in Ecuador, and the resumption of industrialisation and the development of manufacturing industries in Argentina and Brazil. Another important issue is the reconstruction of the state, i.e. attempts to reconstruct democracy and transparency.

Thus, the acquisition of control over a country's own natural resources, development of industries, participatory democracy, and in addition, the development of policies of social redistribution, are the real core of governance in many countries. Left political forces see their central task not as blind faith in development (*'desarrollismo'*), but rather as the creation of practical alternative priorities by deepening democracy and encouraging the participation of the people, and in the reduction of poverty, with respect for the indigenous peoples as a particularly important aspect. At the same time, moreover, there have been concrete steps for transcontinental cooperation, such as the organisations CELAC (*Comunidad de Estados Latinamericanos y Caribenos*) and UNASUR, the ALBA Cooperation, the cooperative effort of left parties in the *Foro Saõ Paolo*, as well as an alternative transnational financial architecture based on the Banco del Sur, which came into operation in the spring of 2012.

In order to initiate a process of reflection between progressive political forces in Europe and Latin America, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has organised conferences and seminars in Brussels in 2009, 2010 (see Daiber 2010, 2011) and 2011, in which the experiences of the Latin American and European left in government participation were discussed. The following compilation and preliminary results refer both to the papers and to the analyses of the Latin American partners.

The general questions for an analysis of the development of left strategies in Latin America in these European-Latin American dialogues were: Is it possible to change the correlation of forces in favour of the working classes through the presence of the left in governments? And beyond that: Is it possible to achieve this through an accumulation of forces to overcome capitalism? And to what degree is a different mode of production intended, or, more specifically: Are there relevant processes of socio-ecological transformation which can be implemented?

In addition to the major issues, concrete goals determine the policies of left governments. The most historically important goal to emerge from the history of dictatorships and authoritarian systems in Latin America may be a respect for the autonomy and participation of the indigenous peoples, which have been oppressed for many centuries. It is they particularly who fought for liberation from dictatorships and from foreign control. Based on these experiences, left governments are attempting to develop alternative models of democratisation, in which the autonomy and dignity of the individual are seen as key values.

An equally important goal is the implementation of social policies, which could permit people affected by misery and social exclusion not only to gain access to economic resources and to jobs, but also to stabilise their social situations by participation in public education programmes and healthcare systems. The implementation of such fundamental rights as education, health, housing, and decent work for the majority of the people will require a reorientation of national budgets, financial policies and, not least, the transformation of administrations. Here too, what is at issue are processes of democratisation which would enable transparency and participation.

In some countries – especially Brazil – the implementation of social policies is being pushed forward, especially in the context of the classical

social-democratic compromise between capital and wage labour, by means of classical resource and industrial policies and agribusiness on the one hand and redistribution policies on the other. Other countries, such as Venezuela, are trying to explore socialist models of production and reproduction, alongside the classical social-democratic strategies. Thus, the question as to whether capitalist relations can be overcome, or whether what is at issue is not rather the generation of space for redistribution policies by means of an efficient state, is open.

Essential for a political understanding of the left governments in Latin America is the attempt to define democracy as a participatory model, although the very marked orientation of politics toward charismatic leaders represents a considerable difference from European traditions. The fact that previously excluded groups of the population have become autonomous political actors is of extraordinary significance; nonetheless, it does mean, as conflicts in Ecuador and Bolivia have shown, that there are contradictions to be resolved between the governments and the social movements. A realisation of this political understanding can only be successful, however, if a functional state structure which meets the classical criteria can be established. Carlos Castaneda from El Salvador described the tasks facing his country after the electoral success of the leftist FMLN in 2009 as follows: “Making development possible requires a welfare state, a democratic state under the rule of law that is functional and powerful, and provides legal and civic security as well as access to the vital goods and services for the population. That requires a profound democratisation of power and state relations, as well as market regulations and non-privatisation of public services, and is expressed in a truly democratic government, capable of promoting the construction of a widely shared vision” (Castaneda Magaña 2010: 109).

At the same time, the opposition against the left governments in Latin America is very active. The attempt by the left in Latin America to change the direction of history is constantly under threat. The 2010 coup against the left-liberal President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras, the attempted coup against Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2010, and the ‘cold’ coup against Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo in 2012, as well as the repeated attempts to use the political struggles in Bolivia for a coup against the leftist government, all tell a clear story: the national oligarchies, who fear for their power, as well as the United States, are continuing their attempts to maintain

control. Fernando Lugo ruled in Paraguay against a right-wing majority in Parliament. The situation in many Central American countries is dominated by drug wars and the rule of violence. The extensive crime wave among the young people of Mexico is an especially terrible example of how a once relatively well-functioning country could turn into a failed state as a result of pursuing the neo-liberal agenda. The opposition in the countries ruled by left governments in Latin America is aggressive, and would shun no act of violence or coup d'état in order to regain their power. They use strategies of secession from the nation-states, electoral fraud and media campaigns in order to destabilise the leftist governments. They are still powerful, and in spite of the considerable differences between the different countries, Iole Ilíada of the Perseu Abramo Foundation in Brazil has reached the following sobering conclusion: "It is imperative to realise that those who control financial capital, production, the land, the media, knowledge and science have in effect maintained their dominance, and even possibly increased it. From a structural point of view, these societies have not changed profoundly [...] The presence of the left in governments via elections, as much as we want that presence to last, is always a transitional experience" (Ilíada 2011: 46).

Under such restricted conditions, the left governments can nonetheless point to considerable successes: Venezuela, with its project for a 'Bolivarian Revolution', has most clearly demonstrated its refusal to enter into compromises with the reactionary forces; at the same time however, Venezuela is the one country whose wealth is 90% dependent on oil. The redistribution policies of the leftist government in favour of the previously excluded groups of the population depend on the ability of the country to function in the capitalist process. At the same time, experiments with socialist models of production and reproduction are taking place. The socialist mode of production seeks to consolidate an endogenous economy of multiple internal productive chains, diversifying its export potential for goods and services, after meeting domestic needs. It seeks to promote scientific and technological innovation adapted to the goal of meeting those human needs. However, the greatest contradiction, without a doubt, is the development in Brazil. That country is consistently following the classical social-democratic path of compromise between capital and labour, and the concomitant policies of stabilising social relations.

Reports from other countries, too, have critically addressed the progress achieved to date, and the limits of political autonomy. All reports have made clear that what is at stake is no less than the transformation from a capitalist to a socialist mode of production. One fact which is assessed as revolutionary is the nationalisation of resources – especially petroleum – as well as the development of manufacturing industries and the social redistribution of the profits thus achieved. In this context, the countries see democratisation and the participation of the previously excluded groups of the population as a key factor, and are attempting to implement by means of a redistribution process social policies in the areas of education, health and basic needs, as well as securing the livelihood of the peasantry. However, all this is being carried out in the context of globalised and regional capitalisms. Héctor Rodríguez Castro's vividly formulated characterisation of Venezuela can certainly be generalised: One could argue that the political and social left is trying to develop a socialist soul in a capitalist body (Daiber/Kulke 2010: 14).

The transitional practice in particular countries includes, to very differing degrees, the perspective of socio-ecological transformation. The contradiction between industrialisation, exploitation of resources, exhaustion of nature, and the realisation of ecological goals is just as deep in Latin America as it is in other regions of the world. In his critique of the global North, Valter Pomar (2011: 86) from the *Foro São Paulo* says: "In all countries, including those where the official discourse is in favour of environmental protection, there is a growing conflict resulting from an obvious equation: if rich countries do not assume responsibility for the environmental costs and continue to threaten the political and economic stability of poor countries, these countries will be forced to choose between rapid economic growth, with its potential for major environmental damage, or growth with a high degree of environmental protection, which is then very expensive and slow."

That means that the left governments are in a position in which they have few options. On the one hand, they have to try to initiate industrialisation processes, and to exploit their often enormous natural wealth in order to develop their economies in such a way that social redistribution processes of significant dimensions will be possible. And on the other, they must at the same time try to preserve their wealth of yet little-damaged

ecosystems. The contradiction which thus emerges can hardly be resolved under existing conditions: On the one hand, huge areas of land are being consumed for the production of energy crops, fire clearance in the Amazon area is literally heating up the climate crisis, and the pollution of the soil by poisonous waste water is inhibiting the conditions of life of the local people. On the other, ambitious projects are being realised to protect the natural environment, the rain forest and the conditions of life of local indigenous peoples. The process of rethinking is however being determined less by concrete practice than by the general formulation of new fundamental societal values. The goal of harmonious life (*vivir bien*) formulated in the new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, the establishment of nature as a legal entity, the recognition of inter-culturalism and cultural self-determination of indigenous peoples, as well as thorough-going gender justice, together constitute a value system revolutionary both in its complexity and in its particular aspects. For the first time, the interconnection of human development and nature is being formulated non-hierarchically, with neither subordination nor exploitation as its legally determining foundation. The recognition of nature as a legal entity is moreover a new concept that bursts the framework of all classical judicial theories.

The existential contradiction between industrial development and the environment remains unresolved – as is clearly visible in the development strategies of Venezuela and Brazil. One urgent issue is the transfer of the rich natural and mining resources to national control, i.e. the struggle with the global capitalist major players, the development of national processing industries, and the introduction of minimal social standards for all citizens – in other words, classical redistribution policies. None of the oil-producing countries – Venezuela, Ecuador or Brazil – can, in view of the massive impoverishment of major sectors of the population after centuries of feudal rule and imperialism, dispense with redistribution policies. By the same token, none of the countries with valuable natural or mining resources, such as lithium or rare earth metals, can dispense with their exploitation.

Thus, the contradiction seems to be threefold: (1) to implement, under the regime of capitalism, transformational strategies which will open up a post-capitalist, socialist perspective; (2) to re-appropriate the rich resources, including their exploitation; and (3) to initiate a process of democratic participation and articulation of new values of ‘the common good of human-

kind' (cf. Daiber/Houtart 2012) – i.e., of values which are of significance for all humanity worldwide – but which provoke conflicts within the respective societies.

The new values demand the preservation of the conditions of life of local communities, and investment in sustainable and locally appropriate technologies, the maintenance and reconstruction of small-holder agriculture, and an end to the destruction of the rain forests, and the participation of indigenous peoples in the political decision-making processes. It also involves an attempt to re-determine the basic values of societies, including respect for nature and living entities with their own rights, and to realise the goals of good cohabitation of human beings beyond the structures of consumerism.

But there is also the classical duty to pursue industrial development and introduce social standards for the working classes. This contradiction is neither purely theoretical, nor practically resolvable in the real world – at least not under the capitalist conditions which are dominant globally today. This sobering fact only becomes bearable if the main emphasis is placed both on implementing concrete projects, for the practical and visible improvement of the social situation of those strata of the population affected by social exclusion, and, at the same time, on practical and visible projects of ecological and cultural renewal. Even if what is taking place in the countries governed by the left in Latin America is a controversial process, it is obvious that we are seeing the beginning of transformational social processes, in which the two sides of the social contradiction are confronting one another.

Latin America teaches us that it is necessary to be aware of the contradiction between current societies and their bio-physical basis, and to repeatedly decide on a case-by-case basis and in the democratic process of negotiation in which direction we need to act – and also to apply that same standard to our own actions, and work for ecological embedding in industrial processes.

This contradiction is without doubt the most pressing expression of the conflict between the domination of nature and a democratic shaping of society's relationship to nature. But it cannot be resolved in the context of the current historical situation. What we can, however, demand of ourselves – regardless of whether we live in the North or in the South – is

that we create consciousness regarding this contradiction, and seek intelligent solutions in the concrete contexts of action, so as to make possible a step-by-step reduction of the domination of techno-capitalist processes over the human conditions of life on our planet.

The significance of this establishment of values for humankind in general is evident. They are of fundamental significance for socio-ecological transformation processes, not only in Latin America, but for all of humankind. Their intention is a new mode of living in opposition to the laws of capitalist economic development. At the same time, people affected most by the implementation of industrial development projects often come into conflict with one another, a prime example being the partial interests of affected people in the preservation of their natural environment coming into contradiction with the general interest of reducing poverty and realising general rights of protection. This has been shown repeatedly in current conflicts in Ecuador and Bolivia. The contradictions stemming from society's relationship to nature have not been overcome yet. This task is being carried out in the space between the short-term goal of implementing fundamental classical social reforms, and the equally urgent requirement to preserve and develop the natural environment. This contradiction is emerging clearly, and has to be addressed repeatedly. Perhaps the key difference is that the realisation of participatory democracy permits citizens to carry out these disputes in public, and to negotiate solutions. The upsurge in Latin America is only the beginning of a development which is significant not only for the continent itself, but also for globalisation-critical ecological and progressive movements in other parts of the world, or, as Valter Pomar concluded: "In addition to what has been said above, the socialists of the twenty-first century cannot plead ignorance with regard to the complexity and the long struggle to overcome capitalism. The struggle for power can be resolved in years, but the creation of a different society is a project that will last decades and centuries. Making development possible requires a welfare state, a democratic state under the rule of law that is functional and powerful, and provides legal and civic security as well as access to the vital goods and services for the population. That will require a profound democratisation of power and state relations, as well as market regulations and the non-privatisation of public services, and must be expressed in a truly democratic government, capable of promoting the construction of a widely shared vision" (Pomar 2011: 89).

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