

NEW PATHS TO EMANCIPATION IN LATIN AMERICA?

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RECENT LATIN AMERICAN history is characterized by major and clearly recognizable political “waves” of political change: the rise and fall of a string of military dictatorships from the 1960s to the 70s was followed by a marked trend in the 80s and 90s toward “democratic transitions” (Mexico, with its one-party regime, remained the major exception until the election of neoliberal champion Vicente Fox in 2000). These transitions, as critical voices warned from the outset, were conditioned and endangered by the rising tide, throughout the region and worldwide, of neoliberal economics, and by a generation of political elites, from right to center-left, who saw no other alternative than to buy into the “Washington consensus” of financial orthodoxy, whatever the social consequences. Poverty continued to grow; today it affects over 60% of the region’s population, including 50% living in conditions of extreme poverty. The dangers of relapse into authoritarianism, clearly present from the outset, assumed their most visible form with the dictatorship and reign of terror of president Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1992-2000), but in many other countries, top-heavy presidentialist regimes were the rule.

What caused the tide to turn was not only, of course, a series of elections won by the left (Colonel Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, 1998; Lula of the Workers’ Party in Brazil 2002; left-populist general Lucio Gutiérrez in short-lived coalition with the left indigenous movement Pachakutik, 2002; dissident Peronist Néstor Kirchner in Argentina 2003, Dr. Tabaré Vázquez and the *Frente Amplio* - Broad Front - in Uruguay, 2004), but also a remarkable wave of social movements of resistance to neoliberal economics and its social consequences: the movement of the unemployed in Argentina (*piqueteros*); the powerful, left-oriented indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador; the landless peasant movement in Brazil, the mobilization of coca growers in Bolivia; successful popular movements to block privatization plans in Bolivia and Uruguay, etc.

Although there is undeniably a regional phenomenon at work here, which makes Latin America the one place on earth where overt resistance to neoliberalism is the greatest, each national experience is different and each needs to be examined individually before any conclusions can be drawn about new paths to emancipation in Latin America. Although the situation has clearly taken a more revolutionary turn in Venezuela than elsewhere under the presidency of Hugo Chávez Frías; although the emergence of indigenous movements as an important force for social and political change in Ecuador and Bolivia, after centuries of reproduction of colonial ethnoraacial relations, is in itself an important historical development; although privatization plans have been stymied by powerful popular protests in Bolivia and Uruguay; although plans for a free trade zone throughout the Americas are currently challenged and on hold; although it may sometimes occur to directors of the international financial institutions and to Bush administration officials that Latin America may be slowly escaping from their grip, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that a durable challenge to the neoliberal model is being mounted. There are clear signs of hope but these must be interpreted with great caution and with close attention to local context.

A tone of very prudent optimism, sometimes turning into overt skepticism regarding the capacity of the Latin American left to convert its mass support into effective “counter-hegemonic” politics, characterizes most of the contributions of *Mouvements et pouvoirs de gauche en Amérique latine*. This issue of the journal *Alternatives Sud* (Louvain), published in book form, is one of the first serious attempts to grapple with the question of change in Latin America, both country by country and as a whole. With the exception of the introduction by Bertrand Duterme of the journal’s editorial board, all the articles that make up this volume have been translated from the Spanish (9) and the Portuguese (3) and all are the products of leading Latin American analysts and commentators. Nearly all the authors are professional sociologists and/or political scientists, though some are journalists or militants, and several have contributed actively to the (re-)emergence of the Latin American left. The first five essays are ambitious attempts to evaluate the situation throughout the region; they are followed by case studies of seven countries that appear to be at the cutting edge of change: Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela and (possibly) Mexico.

Among the five authors who took on the task of a panoramic, region-wide view of social and political processes, several common themes dominate the analysis: the ravaging social effects of neoliberal economic policies; alienation of broad sectors of the population from electoral politics in an

atmosphere of endemic and growing corruption; the remarkable wave of popular social movements that have taken form over the past decade and a half; their unsettled and contradictory relationship with political movements and parties; and finally, the strong tendency of left parties, when in power, to compromise with neoliberal orthodoxy and thereby fail to forge a new hegemonic blocs capable of forging new alternatives.

Atilio Borón, executive secretary of the important research network CLACSO and professor of social and political theory at University of Buenos Aires, opens the volume with a vigorous essay (“The Challenges facing the Latin American left at the dawn of the 21st century”) expressing his very guarded optimism about the left’s possibilities for moving decisively toward a break with neoliberalism. While encouraged to note that left-wing governments with strong popular backing have been elected in several countries, he finds there is no clear indication that they are ready and willing to go beyond “possibilistic” reforms, which means they may risk catastrophic defeat. Although Borón clearly wishes for a revolutionary solution, he recognizes it is not on the agenda due to scant popular support; but he believes that audacious and well-targeted reforms could begin to reverse the neoliberal tide.

While warning against overly neat recipes for strategic change, Borón does not hesitate to offer some suggestions about what viable left strategies – in the plural – might look like. First, he insists on the importance of the state as the main pillar on which the democratization of society can draw support, “unless one thinks it is possible to institute democracy within the market or within a civil society divided into classes”. Second, he stresses the importance of reorienting the economy toward the internal market, the redistribution of income, and the promotion of ecologically sustainable development. Third, he calls for serious regulation of the market, to reverse the onslaught of neoliberal deregulation. Fourth, and closely related, is his call for a vigorous fiscal policy that would oblige the rich and large corporations to pay, in a region where their “tax veto” is still the rule.

Like a number of other authors in this volume, Borón expresses exasperation at the failure of the Lula government in Brazil to break with the orthodoxy of financial markets and open a more decisive path to change. If Brazil, with its abundant natural resources and sources of energy, its strong industrial and agricultural base, cannot do it, he asks, then who can?

Borón unfortunately does not examine the Venezuelan experience in detail, but he is clearly pleased by signs of a more radical turn since 2001, after

initial hesitations. Significantly, Cuba remains a positive example for Borón, thanks to its high standards of health, nutrition and education; the problem of a “democratic deficit” does not seem to worry him, and indeed no one else in the book goes so far out of his or her way to praise Cuba. On the other hand, he is worried that certain formulas disseminated by the Zapatistas in Chiapas run the risk of generating romantic illusions about “democracy for all”.

Beatriz Stolowicz, sociologist and political scientist at the Autonomous University of Xochimilco, Mexico, also engages in frequent warnings about the possible failure of left parties to redefine the agenda – and common sense – in matters of economics, or to construct a form of politics in which the national state can again become a focal point for change. In an essay entitled “The Latin American Left, between the test of power and the will for change”), she expresses great skepticism about experiences of left government, since leftist parties have often presided over a worsening of the very economic situation they denounce.

Stolowicz shows some originality here by going into detail about how politics actually operates in Latin America. She insists on the neoliberal right’s often-underestimated capacity to take initiatives, reshape the political game, and fashion common sense. In particular she stresses the neoliberal right’s methodical programs to empty the national state of its power while devolving as much decision-making as possible toward local government. This strategic decentralization, the institutional aspect of neoliberal “adjustment”, tends to favor the “dissolution of collective social subjects” and the tendency of individuals to drop out of the political process – as evidenced by growing rates of abstention, even in the countries where voting is supposedly mandatory.

Stolowicz clearly sees this tendency to value the local as a potential trap for the left. The celebration of the “microsocial” – the privileged terrain of NGOs, who owe all their subsidies to it – is understandable insofar as local spaces sometimes become the site of creative experiments in self-management, participative democracy, and effective pragmatic resistance to neoliberalism. The participative budgetary process in Porto Alegre, Brazil, is a famous case in point, among other exercises in “good government” of which the Latin American left has a monopoly (the right simply not being interested in such frivolities). However, an exclusive focus on the local can easily, she says, feed into to a purely administrative logic, a “gradualist ideology”, and, in the end can lead to paralysis in challenging existing power

structures. Stoliczka thus joins several authors in the volume who incite the left to reappropriate the question of political power and to begin forging in earnest alternative models of economic and social development.

Emir Sader, a leading Brazilian political intellectual, asks the fateful question "Are Latin American struggles against neoliberalism effective?". Beginning with the assertion that such struggles should aim to institute a different hegemonic model and not just oppose a certain kind of economic policy, he judges by this standard that "no government... on the South American continent has succeeded in breaking with the hegemony of neoliberal policies". He counts the Chávez experience in Venezuela as a partial exception, which "has not fully experienced the neoliberal model, any more than it has succeeded in putting into place a new model".

In an overly quick comparative panorama of struggles against neoliberalism, he identifies four basic sorts of dynamics at work. First, that of the Zapatistas, who have mostly concentrated their efforts on consolidating local power in Chiapas, and have "renounced proposing a hegemonic model at the national scale". Sader, like Borón, is of the opinion that the Zapatistas' "theory of the transformation of the world without taking power" and their critique of parties and the state has as its corollary "an overvaluation of social movements and local actions and attempts to construct an alternative hegemony". This is one explanation for what he calls the "gulf" between the Zapatistas and the center-left party *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD), and between the perspective of the indigenous peasants in Chiapas and that of the national political scene.

A second model is found in the peasant and indigenous movements of Ecuador, which have in recent years imposed themselves as a "determinant social force in the evolution of the country", having taken a leading role in the overturning of three presidents. Their short-lived and highly problematic participation in the government of Lucio Gutiérrez (2002) led the movement to become severely divided over the evaluation of this experience. For Sader the Ecuadoran experience shows that "the movement... remains dependent on the resolution of the crisis of hegemony; it maintains a strong power of veto but shows itself incapable of building alternatives to the hegemonic power, be it from the summit or from the base".

The Bolivian case, Sader's third key "model" of socio-political dynamics, resembles that of Ecuador except that at one point, the Bolivian movements appeared able to "surmount the hegemonic crisis" in their successful

prevention of the privatization of water in 2000 and their key role in overturning president Sánchez de Losada in 2003. He notes that the “strategic convergence” between movements (in particular the COB trade-union confederation) and parties (in particular *Movimiento al socialismo*, the ‘Movement toward socialism’ party, a direct outgrowth of the movement of coca growers), turned into a bitter dispute that weakened both sides and brought forward no credible political alternative to neoliberalism.

For his fourth and final model, Sader draws on the experiences of both the Workers’ Party in Brazil and the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay. In both cases, he sees a seemingly unbridgeable gap between left parties in power who cling to neoliberal economic policies and seek “governability”, and militant movements with much different aspirations.

Sader too sees the Venezuelan experience as a case apart, given the government’s strong role in fomenting popular mobilization; given Chávez’s assurance of support from his own military after the failed coup d’Etat of 2002 ; and given the country’s abundant oil revenues. Venezuela is “the only country on the continent where social rights are progressing”; however, in his view, “the way in which the government is supporting the social movement tends to challenge the autonomy of the latter. A “hierarchized and centralized” Bolivarian movement faces a “multiple and diversified” social movement.

In the absence of any single social or political force in Latin America able at present to successfully challenge the neoliberal model, Sader sees fit in conclusion to define four necessary conditions for mounting such a challenge: a) strong popular mobilization, b) platforms that propose concrete alternatives; c) alliances that favor the construction of a popular alternative bloc, c) a political leadership able to formulate strategies that channel the accumulated strength of social movements into national policy, given that “the overcoming of neoliberalism implies the affirmation of universal rights”. This skeletal formula would certainly call for some fleshing out, which Sader, as a veteran contributor to political debates in Brazil, is certainly capable of when not confined to such a panoramic exercise.

Theotonio dos Santos, a venerable Brazilian sociologist historically associated with Marxism and dependency theory, devotes his reflections, in “Latin American Social Movements, from resistance to the offensive?”, to what he calls a “significant transformation of the subjectivities of our peoples”. This development is due first of all to a “destructuring of the social fabric” after

three decades of neoliberal policies, combined with state repression, an unprecedented ideological offensive to promote neoliberalism, which succeeded for a time, in several countries, in marginalizing anything resembling a critique of capitalism or free-trade.

After a very general overview of social movements in the region since the 1920s-30s, dos Santos moves to examine “emerging social forces” in Latin America, such as feminist movements, indigenous movements, blacks, ecologists, etc., who are imposing “new themes”, including, in his view, a radical break with what he calls “the ideology of modernity as a superior and unique form of civilization”, and turning toward “a new process of pluralistic, truly planetary, post-racist, postcolonial and possibly postmodern civilization” – a break encouraged by an internationalization of struggles (he refers here to Seattle 1999, the World Social Forums at Porto Alegre, and the like). Dos Santos is clearly less preoccupied here by short-term objectives than in a process of civilizational change that he sees as unfolding over several decades at least.

Hernán Ouviaña, an Argentinian sociologist, is the author in this volume who comes closest to applying models of social movement theory to current and recent events in Latin America. In the “The new political radicalities in Latin America: Zapatistas, *piqueteros* and landless peasants” he asks what makes these three social movements both “new” and very different from those movements designated as “new” by European and North American sociologists 20-25 years ago. One of their most salient characteristics is that their “modalities of social protest go beyond the problematic of labor and take root more in practices of a territorial type”, in which housing, food, the environment, public services, human rights of the defense and recovery of traditional values become important axes of struggle. “Society itself”, he writes, “becomes a place of confrontation in which protection and reproduction tend to merge”.

Latin American left political parties, Ouviaña writes, have “internalized the crisis of the interventionist state” and “shown themselves incapable of serving as mediators in the state/society relationship”. In the meantime there has arisen a new generation of social movements characterized by their “self-limiting” character (here he quotes S. Zizek), that is, little inclined to enter into customary struggles for power and reticent to turn into more rigid party structures with governmental aspirations. They declare, at the same time, that their objective is more radical: it is “to struggle for a basic transformation in the way of acting and thinking”.

Compared with those in Europe, movements in Latin America represent more the “periphery” of society than its “center” – that is, excluded groups, including unemployed workers, indigenous peoples or rural workers, all with low levels of schooling, as opposed to movement protagonists in the North, who usually have higher economic status and high levels of education. And whereas European movements tend, he says, to turn into organizations aiming to establish a space of negotiation within the state, in Latin America, few movements orient their action toward the spheres of power. The neo-Zapatista EZLN is an “extreme” case of this, he says, since its members must renounce any aspiration to occupy political positions, but the remark applies as well to the *piqueteros* in Argentina, most of whose currents reject involvement in electoral politics; and to the movement of landless peasants in Brazil; which has not subordinated its action to the agenda of the state, even with the Workers’ Party in power. Ouviaña sees current Latin American movements as innovative in their experimentation with new social relations in daily life; they are potentially prefigurative of a future society and have the potential to build the political sphere directly into civil society.

On the basis of these observations, he challenges an old thesis of Alain Touraine, dating from the 1980s, according to which class conflict has “dissolved”; Ouviaña could not disagree more, while allowing that “flexible and detailed” analyses must be made of the “class nature of all social movements”.

Another broad characteristic of the movements, in Ouviaña’s view, is that their leaders have a high degree of commitment and direct involvement with the communities in which the struggles occur. In terms of discourse, Ouviaña sees recent movements as speaking “new languages” combining earlier elements (Guevarist humanism, or liberation theology) with a strong tendency to declare their autonomy with respect to the state and to all self-proclaimed political vanguards. The notion of “dignity” frequently found in the discourse reflects the movements’ strong tendency to reject policies that generate exclusion of whatever origin and to defend, often with forms of direct action, any attack on the “instances, values and cultures rooted in their communities”.

In all three countries, Ouviaña sees a “weakening of the institutional capacity of bourgeois representative regimes to function as an effective mediator when faced with social protest inevitably engendered by neoliberal policies”. However, problematic party-movement relations have yet to become stabilized in ways that can lead to strategic change. Ouviaña nonetheless ends on an optimistic note : thanks to the World Social Forum and other

instances, movements from different countries have been able to form bonds and demonstrate that “rebellion is just as international as capital”.

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The seven single-country analyses are all rather different in nature; some are more complete than others, but each provides an excellent window on the current state of the left and social movements in concrete national contexts.

Sociologist Maristella Svampa provides a useful chronicle of the fortunes of the Argentinian piquetero since its inception in the years 1996-97 but does not sketch in the elements of political context which might allow readers to better understand how this movement relates to others that have changed the socio-political landscape in a context of financial collapse and repeated political crises that rocked the country from mid-90s until the election of Kirchner in 2003. For example, in response to the collapse and massive disinvestment, hundreds of worker cooperatives have formed to help save jobs, and these have become a vital new terrain of self-management, possibly suggesting ways beyond neoliberalism if the political conditions were present... but Svampa unfortunately doesn't breathe a word of this.

Raúl Zibechi, Uruguayan political commentator, tells the story, in “The Uruguayan Left: from cultural hegemony to political hegemony”, of how the *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) – comprising socialists, communists, ex-urban guerilleros of the Tupamaro movement, but also the Christian Democracy party – came to power in 2003. This left victory, while a first in this country's history, was no surprise, according to Zibechi, since the Front grows historically out of a republican (small r), secular and democratic tradition dating back to the presidency of José Batlle y Ordóñez (1903-1907, 1911-1915). In spite of the long night of military repression (1973-1985), the left has managed to sustain a form of cultural hegemony thanks to its “grassroots social networks”, its strong presence in the capital, Montevideo, where half the country's three million inhabitants reside, and a broad inter-class appeal. “At the apogee of the era of privatizations throughout the world”, Zibechi writes, “the ‘common sense’ of Uruguayans told them that this was the wrong path”. He is much less sanguine, however, about the ability of the left in power to actually reverse the neoliberal tide: little Uruguay's economy is tightly interlocked with those of neighboring Argentina and Brazil; the debt continues to weigh heavily on any ambitions to increase social spending; and the social movements are described as currently rather lethargic, making a long-term “counter-hegemonic project” highly unlikely for the time being.

Certainly the most moving piece in the volume is the lament by Plinio Arruda Sampaio, a founder of the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) and its leader in the constitutional congress of 1987-88. Like several other authors, but with greater poignancy, he emphasizes how much a disappointment Lula's presidency has been to date: no rise in wages, no agrarian reform, no efforts to improve the lot of poor urban dwellers, no satisfaction for indigenous peoples, no fiscal reform, no improvement (on the contrary) in the indicators of poverty, in a country with the highest rate of inequality in the world; pursuit of neoliberal policies in an effort not to alienate foreign investors; fragmentation within the left, corruption within the ranks of the PT itself, and the list goes on. The only signs of innovation Arruda Sampaio can point to are on the foreign policy front, where the government has managed to organize effective resistance to US plans to incorporate the entire region in a free-trade zone. Lula, he notes, continues to remain a popular president, thanks to the personal charisma factor, but this provides little consolation to the left, nationally and internationally, which had placed such great hopes in the giant of the continent.

"Bolivia: the historical background and the challenges of the new left" is the title of an offering by Hugo José Suárez, a sociologist based in Mexico. Beginning in the early 20th century, his socio-political chronicle leads up to the formation, circa 2000, of new and remarkable oppositional forces, following the death of an earlier incarnation of the left during the "cycle of neoliberalism" beginning (roughly 1985-2000). In the period from 1986 to 2003, a total of seven governmental "pacts" were negotiated in an attempt to provide stability under the socially dire conditions of neoliberalism, but the "governability" of this "pacted democracy" has, in Suárez's view, exhausted itself: "Bolivia", he writes confidently, "is living the final moments of a form of politics and economics in which the neoliberal paradigm predominates". The broad and very militant mobilizations beginning in 2000 with the "water war" (a struggle against the privatization of water distribution under the aegis of foreign corporations) and culminating in the "gas war" (a movement to maintain gas production in national hands), were catalysts for the birth of two significant political movements: *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), under the leadership of Evo Morales, a leader of the union of coca producers and a man of indigenous origin; and the *Movimiento indio pachakuti* (MIP). These two parties received a combined score of 28% in 2002 and now have a real presence in parliament. Both parties have a pronounced indigenous character and both see themselves as "political instruments of social organizations". "The left", he concludes, "is in a position to vie for political power and have a chance to

influence [Bolivia's] orientation". But he says little about how the movements, in spite of their noteworthy radicality, can practically open the way to a sustained challenge to the neoliberal order.

The tumultuous events in Ecuador over the past 10 years, including the destitution of three elected presidents, provide a rich laboratory for reflection on the possibilities for social transformation in Latin America today. Augusto Barrera Guarderas, in "Ecuador: the indigenous movement, between the social and the political", makes one of the most stimulating contributions to the volume by examining how the indigenous movements and parties, as key components of an emerging new left, have attempted to articulate social movements with political power, and social concerns with specifically indigenous ones. The brief participation of the Pachakutik party in the government of Lucio Gutiérrez, a left-populist presidential candidate who turned into a neoliberal and authoritarian president, and ended up being driven from power, is a fascinating case study in the stakes of power for an emerging left which may command powerful popular movements capable of vetoing government after neoliberal government, but, as nearly all the authors point out, does not yet have its own "counter-hegemonic" formula for initiating the transition to a new logic.

In this respect, the Chávez experience in Venezuela is no doubt the one single "laboratory" of greatest importance to the Latin American left. In his contribution ("Venezuela in search of a counter-hegemonic project"), sociologist Edgardo Lander, one of the most original critical thinkers in Latin America today, makes it clear from the outset that "in a global post-Berlin wall context characterized by the absence of clear alternatives to the neoliberal capitalist hegemonic model, one should not be surprised at the absence in Venezuela today of what could be called a national alternative project". He points out that when Chávez arrived in power with no fixed body of doctrine to work from, and even today it is not terribly clear what sort of counter-hegemonic strategy is possible, and whether such a strategy would be "an anti-neoliberal project within capitalism or an anti-capitalist project".

The initial priorities of the Chávez regime had mostly to do with institutional change – the passage from the 4th to the 5th Republic. The new Constitution (1999) pays much attention to basic human rights, education in particular, and to participatory democracy, but does not codify anything as elaborate as an alternative model of economic development. The "right to economic freedom", including private property, is proclaimed but at the same time the responsibilities of the state are demarcated in the commercial

and industrial domains. The oil sector is a reserved domain of the state given its strategic character; the state is also assigned a key role in developing a sustainable agriculture and assuring food security.

The further Lander moves toward the present, in particular the period since April 2002, when Chávez's successfully foiled a coup attempt with broad popular support, the further he seems willing to revise in part his initial skepticism. Policies adopted since 2001 in favor of popular education and health, popular participation in local government, cooperative economic production of various sorts and also land reform, add up for Lander to "a new horizon of public policies which, in these areas, represents an attempt to be coherent" and play the role of a 'counter-hegemonic social model' in relative harmony with the broad principles laid down in the Bolivarian constitution of 1999". But Lander sees excessive state centralization as a danger, in a context of frequent conflict between the central state and territories governed by the opposition; and he is clearly leery of the "one-person leadership" factor. He nonetheless expresses satisfaction at the growing "incorporation, as subjects of political and social action, of the poor and historically excluded majority in the country", for this is "no doubt the main conquest on the path to a democratic society".

Mexico is the one country treated in this section where the left has not become a serious candidate for power at the national level, although this could soon change with the election of PRD candidate, Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in the presidential election of 2007. That may be why Gilberto López y Rivas' essay "The Left in Mexico: problems and perspectives" is more of a wish list for a united and regenerated left than an analysis of what the left's various components have actually accomplished to date. He divides the Mexican left into four components: 1) left-wing parties, in particular the PRD; 2) the EZLN or neo-Zapatista movement; 3) old-line Marxist guerrilla warriors who continue to have a modest platform of operations in certain southern Mexican states; and 4) a left described as "social, inorganic and multiple, very present in civil society and in the intellectual sphere". By far most of his attention goes to components 1 and 2. The PRD is portrayed as a mostly traditional, opportunistic electoral party, known even to accept among its candidates, with no scruples about their ideas, recent turncoats from the long-dominant *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). The PRD lacks a program, a vision, and any form of serious political contacts internationally. The EZLN is credited with all the virtues the PRD is lacking: the vision of a pluri-ethnic and pluri-cultural state, in which the needs and the culture of indigenous peoples may

finally be taken into account, after centuries of neglect; a democratic authority structure in which the base commands and effectively controls its representatives and leaders; an ethical discourse backed up by practice and therefore capable of restoring a degree of confidence in politics; a vision of how regions can be governed autonomously from the national state; a broad network of international sympathy and active support. The problem being, here as elsewhere, as López y Rivas admits, that the different components of the left have not been able to combine their forces into a broad front capable of becoming a “national counter-hegemonic force”.

There is little need to repeat in conclusion the major leitmotifs of this volume with its 12 invited authors. Its panoramic character makes it useful for jumping into the subject for the first time, but after a time it will whet readers’ appetites for closer analysis the dynamics in each country considered (and others not mentioned: Chile, Peru, El Salvador, Panama, etc.). If I were to formulate any complaints, the first would be that the editorial choices made by *Alternatives Sud* do not involve much real dialogue between partisans of the social movements described and militants closer to a party model of intervention. Clearly these two broad categories of actors need, in each national context, to work out a more stable division of labor if the idea of “counter-hegemony”, subscribed to by nearly all the authors, is to make serious headway. And finally, whether one agrees with his theses or not, Atilio Borón is the only author in the book who begins to asks concrete questions about what can be done to forge a viable counter-project to neoliberalism – not just *who*. Edgardo Lander’s analysis of recent developments in Venezuela since 2001 is useful in this regard but other offerings are thinner – perhaps because the one cutting-edge experiment in opposing neoliberalism today is taking place, for better or for worse, under the sign of colonel Hugo Chávez.

Although our understanding of the present moment may cry out for it, I hesitate to go into much greater detail about the Bolivarian experiment in Venezuela, not yet having observed it up close, but everything seems to indicate that it’s both a fascinating and a very messy process. A number of Venezuelans I know here in France adhere with enthusiasm to “el proceso” but are quick to admit that it’s full of flaws, hesitations and ambiguities. There’s a presidential leadership principle and a populist style at work that make many radical democrats rightfully uneasy – the marathon broadcasts of the live TV show “Aló Presidente” are perhaps too reminiscent of someone on a neighboring island – and yet it’s acknowledged by most people on the left that Hugo Chávez has his heart in the right place. It can’t be denied

that he has played the game of representative democracy as cleanly as any president in Latin America, even when threatened with overthrow and assassination, and with greater success. It is said, however, that some *chavista* candidates, running on the *Movimiento de la Quinta República* (MVR) ticket for governor or mayor, are cronies of the president with no particular competence for their positions and no special taste for popular participation. It's also clear that the titanic efforts channelled into so many elections, and into defending the regime against coups, have taken energy away from the bottom-up dimension of the democratic process. The Bolivarian constitution calls for organs of popular participation and these are taking shape at a very unequal rate and with very unequal results. Labor democracy poses another set of problems: it can't be an easy proposition in a country where half the workers are in the informal sector and where the main historic trade-union confederation, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), which has thrown in its lot with the coup-oriented opposition and within which corruption has been long rampant. Nor has the new, regime-sponsored National Union of Venezuelan Workers, in its bitter rivalry with the CTV, proven very adept in affirming a legitimate representative character among wage workers.

The list of major problems in engendering a serious process of democracy from below could go on and on. And yet one can't hate a process which defines as its central objective the elimination of poverty in a country with a poverty rate of 80%; where literacy programs have scored great successes in a short time and literary classics like *Don Quijote* are circulating like never before; where a real land reform is taking place, targeting properties that have lain unproductive; where workers' cooperatives receive state support; where medical care is available to many people for the first time; where food is supplied to the poor for free or at cost price.

In short, no summary judgment is possible of this process which refers to itself as a revolution. Venezuela is the one country in Latin America where the neoliberal model of economy and society is being challenged frontally and the relationship between state, society and market are somehow being reinvented. It's a complex laboratory to be studied with care. The call for "hands off Venezuela" is a matter of common sense for the North American left, but we obviously need to keep our critical senses about us in supporting this crooked and rather top-heavy path to a new form of democracy.