

# LIBERALISM, THE STATE, PARTIES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:

## A Perspective from Latin American Left

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The effects of "state shrinking" integral to the process of liberalization has had a disarticulating effect on both political and civil society as a whole.

The challenge, perhaps in both the North and the South, will be to recover for the State the capacity to meet growing social demands for action, only this time to do it right. We must reject, once and for all, the view that democratization entails destatization. The defence of political liberalism should not be carried to the extreme to associate it mechanically with the notion of minimal government.

No logical defence can be made for the huge, inefficient, corrupt "public" sectors that existed and continue to exist, and where it makes sense to reduce the size of the state in order to strengthen it. The State can become both leaner and stronger in order to carry out its essential developmental tasks. It must be because democracy can not be, at this stage in our countries, a matter of weakening the State.

By the same token, nor can the task of development simply be referred to the NGOs absolving the State of its responsibilities, also in the name of the local democracy and grass roots organization. The sum of local democratic and development efforts does not equal democracy and development for the nation as a whole - if it did, we would have booming democracies, in Philippines, Guatemala, or Kenya.

State shrinking, however, where and if such shrinking also affects the official coercive apparatus, theoretically entails greater political space for civil society and popular groupings. Theoretical because economic liberalism entails the increasing transfer of state prerogatives to international bodies, all in the name of economic modernization, whereas political liberalism would entail some degree of community empowerment.

A potential opens up in a way that was unimaginable when some two decades ago, powerful state apparatus governed by the military suffocated social movements and political parties often exterminating their leadership.

Political liberalism opened up meaningful civic spaces for popular organizations and trade unions to advocate, organize and grow openly. In many cases, legislatures, regional and local governments were forced to make room for forces linked to grass roots organizations introducing many countries to genuine pluralism for the first time in their history--as opposed to the US defined parameters on pluralism ranging from right to center, but refusing to encompass the left.

The principal challenge for the left remains how to ensure 19th century liberal ideals in the face of 20th century liberal economic practices. Certainly there should be no return to the authoritarian and populist notions of the thirties. However unfulfilled, there should be no going

back on commitments to civil and political rights, free elections, basic human rights and security from persecution on account of ideas. We can only hope that we are beyond an era of military interventions, as peoples also remember that earlier military regimes also brought economic ruin.

This does not mean that Latin Americans must be forced to live with economic ruin simply for the sake of upholding formalistic democracies. No matter how unfavourable the global correlation of powers and how inflexible the global market structures, the popular forces cannot simply come to the conclusion that we must be content with holding our political ground until a more favourable conjuncture rolls around.

Given the workings of the market and its increasing techno-ideological on societies, to stand still is to fall back. Consciousness as well as state power diminish with every passing day; time is not on our side, and it behooves political leadership to organize serious theoretical and political challenges to the "new world order"

A first step is to reassume the revolutionary potential of liberalism. To take it to its fullest socialist extent--to group together all who continue to favour the full socialization of the benefits of democracy, including and especially its economic aspects.

**What is to be Done?**

The task awaiting the popular sectors is not the expression of political opportunity, nor of evangelical hope, but of historical necessity. The discontented may not rally around the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, or of the vanguard party, but neither will they remain dispersed forever. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the forms of organization that will be taken will necessarily be progressive ones. In other parts of the world we have already seen societal expressions or rather explosions of discontent that take the form of destructive hatred, racism, ultranationalism, xenophobia, fundamentalism, etc.

In Latin America the popular forces have not responded with the destructive expressions of class hatred that has been inflicted on them for so long, although violence has been no stranger either. The anti-liberal rebellion may take the form of the growth of religious evangelism, much to the chagrin of the Catholic Church--or of recruits for movements of hatred such as Sendero Luminoso, but this is simply a notable exception which sustains the rule.

Something positive therefore must be said about the historical liberal tradition which taken by some literally force important and even revolutionary changes. True, there were those on the extreme left and extreme right (particularly in the armies) who attacked the liberal emphasis on political and civil rights in the name of Marxist-Leninist or national security dogma.

One would hope that, freed from the dichotomistic attributes artificially imposed by the Cold War on both Liberalism and Marxism, a theoretical and political re-acquaintance can take place. If the socialist praxis can learn from the mistakes of a statist experiment that proved op-

pressive to the individual and society, can capitalism manifest a similar correction in regard to the functioning of a market place free from state interference but equally oppressive in social terms?

This is not to make a case for a rediscovery of Bernstein and the Western European social democratic path. Ours is a different continent confronted with a different array of forces at a different historical moment--a part of the world in which apologists for capitalists have failed to come up with a satisfactory "really existing" response to solve the problem of inequity.

**"Partyocracy" (Partidocracia) or Democracy?**

Recent events in Venezuela, Peru and Brazil, point to a growing skepticism, particularly among the

a limited democracy under the tutelage of the United States or of the traditional parties.

Corruption in this context becomes all the more intolerable as the corrupt demand austerity that undermines living standards (including middle sectors in society and in the army). Successful structural adjustment or free market reform presupposes a legitimacy that is often lacking. The results are protests on the streets.

The dissatisfaction, however, transcends ethical considerations. The formula of reducing poverty by generating wealth at the expense of the poor will not work economically and is a disaster politically.<sup>1</sup> The consequences cannot be ignored by the United States which, if for no other immoral reason that poverty is now recognized to be jeopardizing

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young, in regard to the equation often preached (but not upheld) between democracy and multi-party electoral politics. A more accepted equation is that between established parties and corruption.

Some have interpreted the growing aversion with political parties as a threat to democracy. Once again the assumption is that multiple political party jockeying equals democracy. It may however be the contrary as the commitment to democracy is sustained at the grass roots level and it is traditional party behaviours which poses the threat. Indeed, "depoliticization" is only relative insofar as increased mass access to communications, particularly television, expose new electorates with new ethical demands to the limitations of

Latin America's much heralded "economic adjustment", and if that adjustment is in danger so too is any US economic recovery strategy geared to the growth of Latin American markets.

Is there chance for a rectification before it is too late? Not according to Carlos Andres Perez who, after the coup attempt, came to the conclusion that his government's economic policies continued to be a success, but that his media had failed to convince the population of that fact.<sup>2</sup>

**Repolitization and Popular Movements**

Renewed socialist action and thought may assist liberalism (and

angry middle class liberals) to rediscover the Jacobin dimension. Indeed it may be the only path, if civic and political rights are not to succumb to tendency of the market to exclude from society all that is not "viable" and "competitive" and culturally disposable in the universal end of history. Or to a populist authoritarian pseudo-option.

A crucial question in this regard is what organizational vehicle is to be used to constructively mobilize the disaffected, if indeed political parties--including left ones--are seen to be part of the problem?

A second question is whether the reaffirmation of the identities of the "new" social movements, in part afforded by growing political space, does not feed a dispersion or atomization process also stimulated by the breakdown of statist socialism and the free market cultural-economic onslaught?

In this context, we can only look with hope at the emerging rearticulation of the relation among the social sectors themselves as well with the political parties. This difficult process appears precisely in countries where the left is strongest--El Salvador, Nicaragua, Brazil--and indeed is a principal cause and consequence of that strength.

Resisting the allure of NGOism, many of the "new" social movements are in the process of forging broader social and political alliances. There is little yearning for democratic centralism. Indeed, liberalism as it blends with mass politics (at least in its variant developed in Latin America and absent in much of Africa and East/Central Europe) has opened up meaningful civic spaces for popular organizations and trade unions to advocate, organize and grow openly acquiring new autonomy from the established political machines without abandoning the critique of capitalism.

There is a confluence of sorts between liberalism's doctrinal promotion of individual political identity and the aim of many of the social movements to establish a "non-partisan" --which some confuse mistakenly with non-political--democratic form of social identity. Herein lie both dangers and opportunities: the danger of further atomization of society v. the opportunity of mass democratic "organizing".

Disenchantment with traditional left "politics"--or traditional forms of "organizing"-- does not mean that popular forces have abandoned a broader national anti-capitalist vision, but rather that those struggles

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are being carried out with greater autonomy and specificity. Presumably the movement building is deferred or hopefully is visualized as the culminating feature of the process. The answer will vary from sector to sector, and country to country as the popular forces are left to both fend for themselves in order to survive.

Assuming, however, that there is political and security breathing space for civil society, that the military does not intervene, it may well turn out that local grass roots organizations representing gender, union, rural labourers, urban dwellers, students, ecologist, indigenous and ethnic groupings will continue to thrive. Indeed, that "popular" civil society will have larger impacts by way of mobilizations in which left political parties participate but do not necessarily lead.

Notwithstanding the demobilizing effect of past populist statism and current neoliberal social darwinism (or perhaps because of them) single issue constituencies appear to be multiplying. They reap the benefits of previous struggles, taking advantage where the military allows of the political space offered by liberalism and constitutional rights.

### **New Social Challenges**

The outstanding victory for mass action in 1992 which was to have forced the impeachment of Collor de Mello in Brazil is an outstanding example of successful civic mass ac-

tion. Few believe that such an initiative would have been solely the product of the political establishment or much less of the Congress. Rather the impeachment resulted from the sustained, good natured and nonviolent mobilization of millions of Brazilians on the streets.

In Uruguay seventy percent of the voting population of Uruguay said no in a referendum on privatization. In Nicaragua, the principal trade union movement has taken a somewhat different approach to the privatization drive. While insisting that the state hold on to the principal utility companies, it has agreed that the numerous government owned enterprises accumulated during the Sandinista administration should return to private hands, but first and foremost into the hands of the employees of the same firms. Privatization for the workers, in this context,

represents a new form struggle striking at the heart of the neo-liberal project that seeks to reconcentrate wealth and power in the hands of a pro-US big business.

In North America, anti-NAFTA coalition underscores the importances of solidarity. Herein lies the bond that can join diverse sectors that spill over the neat sociological categories to form new types of structures. True there is an aversion even to the word structures but not to solidarity which is recognized as indispensable to survival. In economic and social terms the coalition defends the right of the "informal sectors" and the "non-competitive" to survive, of their right to a legitimate place in society and in economic policy making, if for no other reason that they are or will be the majorities. Certainly, they will not disappear simply on account of cold-hearted market reasoning that is or was shared by orthodox neo-liberals and doctrinaire marxists.

Another significant example in this regard is the creation of the continental campaign of indigenous, black and popular organizations launched in Managua in October, 1992. Such a display and practice of unity, drawing on the support of the national and international NGO community, sometimes in the face of hostility from governments and indifference from "white" left parties, marks a singular accomplishment. For the first time in the continent's history diverse ethnic and popular sectors have converged to organize on a transnational basis counting on the support of a broad solidarity movement from other continents, including a Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>3</sup>

One can only compare such unity of purpose to what has occurred in parts of Eastern Europe and some of the old Soviet republics where ethnic conflict manipulated by political elites is the order of the day and the search for identity seems to signify hatred of

other minorities. But a stark contrast also to the apparent growing appeal of nihilist groupings such as Sendero Luminoso in Peru.

There is no denying that political society suffers from a profound malaise and its principal patients are the political parties themselves, including the non-capitalist left parties where Latin Americans have traditionally sought alternatives. Today many feel they are also short on convictions.

But creative yet principled rethinking is taking place among the left, to judge by the discussions held at the Sao Paulo Forum which annually brings together virtually the entire Latin American left. The Forum has gone about the task of contributing to the theoretical and

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practical political modernization of the left. The Forum seeks to go beyond the usual denunciations of capitalism concentrating rather on stimulating thinking as to alternatives be they economic, social, political and organizational.<sup>4</sup>

At different paces in different countries, the dispersion is giving way to regrouping in diversity as networks appear and cross constituency and even national barriers. Perhaps the agenda is still not sufficiently strong and independent so as to propel the new organizational impetus forward in the absence of crisis. Still, the Forum recognizes the process of repolitization from below and encourages parties to form part of it.

Movement building, however, may have to precede or reinforce party

structuring, particularly in a multi-party arena where the left is at a structural disadvantage. Parties will have to reflect and lead mass based alternatives if they are to succeed, which in practical terms means replacing the verticalism associated with vanguardism and military struggle, with a creativity in a period of mass politics, where politicking must necessarily dovetail with mass action in order to overcome the structural disadvantages.

The obstacles cannot be minimized, and perhaps the organizational and conceptual challenges are the least daunting. There is the test posed by a new political terrain. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, for example, the FMLN and the FSLN after decades of war become legal

(and perhaps not legitimate in the eyes of Washington and the oligarchy) opposition forces in a political framework subject to international financial and political blackmail.

Will the liberal multi-party electoral framework stand the strain of democratic contest between the neoliberal structural adjustment programs on the one hand and democratic socialists on the other? Or will they collapse as in Peru or simply militarize itself as in Colombia?

The contradictions are as deep as is the aversion to further bloodshed. On the one hand, in an exclusively national context the social balance of forces would seem to be inclined towards the democratic majorities on account of their organized power, but in an international context, the

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business elites, technocrats and wealthy bourgeoisie in general can count on United States support in the crucial battle over who defines the development model.

The contest is most advanced in Central America--ironically or perhaps significantly countries where oligarchies proved more successful in resisting the liberal tide at least until the revolutionary socialist pressure was applied.

Liberalism in this context continues to serve as the battle field. The outcome of the initial wave of liberalization does not mean the end of history, but it is yet to be determined whether its positive political features will survive the social consequences of its economic ramifications. Herein lies the new (and old) task of marxism and marxists.

**Notes:**

1. Even the U. N. World Economic Survey has come to the conclusion that over-reliance on market forces may be self-defeating and that too much emphasis on reducing government budgets was hin-

dering economic growth; the global economy may grow between 1 and 3 per cent in 2003, but the reports admits that the growth will do little to reduce unemployment. "U. N. Says Budget Cuts May Hinder World Growth", **New York Times**, 29-6-92.

2. Barricada, 30-11-92.

3. "III Continental Meeting of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance", **South-South Bulletin**, (Managua), No. 03, December, 1992.

4. The declarations of the Sao Paulo Forum can be found in the **South-South Bulletin**, Nos. 1, 2, and 3. See also the article by William Robinson, "The Sao Paulo Forum: Is There a New Latin American Left?", **Monthly Review**, Vol. 44, No. 7.