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How do you see the emergence of the so-called “progressive” governments in Latin America?

I think there has been an important change in Latin America over the last five to ten years. The neoliberal model had a huge impact on Latin America in the 1990s, and at the end of that decade and at the beginning of the new century the social movements organised a large-scale mobilisation against this model, which was successful to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the country. Overall, the movements managed to de-legitimise the model in most of the continent, and this facilitated the emergence of so-called “progressive” or “left-wing” governments. At the time, the level of commitment to real change in these governments varied from country to country. In the most advanced cases – which were Bolivia, without a shadow of doubt, Venezuela, Ecuador and, to some extent, Argentina – the power of the mobilisations drove from power the most extreme defenders of neoliberalism. In some cases, such as Bolivia, the movements achieved radical change – imposing it from the grassroots, which is very important – and

this permitted Evo Morales and the organised popular sectors from the indigenous communities – the Aymara, the Quechua and those from the lowlands (Guaranís, Chiquitanos and others) – to become the government.

The left throughout the world is very interested in Latin America’s social movements. The governments that have arisen with the support of these movements, in Bolivia for instance, are the cause of much optimism. Do people from outside the region have a romantic view of these movements? Or are they, in fact, very important for the future of the global left?

I don’t think the view from outside is romantic, although there is perhaps some exaggeration or undue optimism. But people are right in seeing these movements as important, because they have the capacity both to de-legitimise the elites and to construct small “other worlds”, experiences that are different from the hegemonic ones and that can be the source of great inspiration when the time comes to build a new society. But this is not to say that all progressive governments emerge from



these movements. That may well be the case in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, but in other countries progressive governments are the product of precisely the opposite – the wish to defeat these movements.

Would you say social movements in Latin America are different from social movements in other regions of the world?

They are very different. They are territorial movements that are firmly rooted in their own space, a space where people live, work, are educated, look after their health, and so on. And in this space they develop social relations of another type, different from capitalist ones. In Latin America there are millions of hectares in the hands of movements which have different economies and different societies. The best known of these movements are the Zapatistas, but there are numerous other examples.

More than a decade ago the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm spoke of the “death of the peasantry” on a world scale. Was he right? Or does what is happening in Latin America with indigenous movements and peasant movements, such as the MST in Brazil, provide overwhelming proof that the peasantry is still alive and kicking? And perhaps, with the pressing need to move away from a carbon economy, the peasant option of ecological agriculture offers a way out of the crisis?

Hobsbawm was largely right to say that the world’s peasantry is dying, because social movements in Latin America today are not largely peasant movements but movements of indigenous communities or of people who live on the outskirts of large cities (which is the case even with the MST). A new reality is appearing, the “rururban”, which is something intermediary that exists both in the countryside and in large cities, with people moving a lot between the two worlds. This is very clear in El Alto [the city that has spread on the altiplano above the capital, La Paz] in Bolivia. It is a process that is taking us into uncharted territory, something that no one predicted. But the peasant who lives exclusively from what he produces on the land is in clear retreat.

How do you see the future? Is there space for real advances by progressive governments?

Or are we just seeing a new configuration of capitalism, with perhaps Brazil emerging as the new regional power but with no real changes in the structure of the old capitalist system?

I think there is everything to play for in a country like Bolivia, where there is a real possibility of constructing something new. There is also an interesting process under way in Venezuela. It’s got a bit stuck at the moment but maybe it can break free and move forward. The other countries, including Ecuador, are, to a greater or lesser degree, carrying on with neoliberalism. Even so, in almost all countries there are movements that are pushing governments to go further. It is clear that there has been a change in the balance of power. We are witnessing a loss in US hegemony across the whole continent, or at least a weakening in the absolute hegemony it held for so many decades. The country that is benefiting most is Brazil, the seventh-largest economy in the world, a key country in the continent, which under the Lula government has greatly strengthened Brazilian multinationals that export capital to the region and have established crude ways of exploiting the environment and exploiting people. Indeed, Brazil is becoming a big problem. Its capitalism, successful in its own terms, is demobilising social movements, buying them off with its enormous resources, like the untold riches the government is predicting from the recently discovered oil reserves. Of course, Brazil is not the only problem. The USA and the global multinationals are trying to regain the initiative. It’s a complex situation. Even so, I think we are living through a period of change. The forces for change are getting stronger. I’m not referring to political parties or to governments but to the forces for change from below. So I am cautiously optimistic, not for Brazil but for most of the rest of the continent.

How do you see the various processes of South American integration? ALBA? Unasur?

I see ALBA as something very positive, necessary even. It’s a way of taking advantage of the space in the present system, pushing it to its limits. Unasur is very different. It is promoting integration capitalist-style. In some ways, it is positive because it is setting limits to US expansionism. But it comes at a price: the growing power of Brazil.

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