

Alternative Globalizations In Latin America: Bolivia and Venezuela

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Far from the “end of history” the twenty-first century has witness the birth of widespread alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. These new political struggles create the experience, practice and consciousness that will help determine the future course of global society. If we hope to develop a relevant theory of social change we need to study the important battles of today that have raised the banner of alternative globalizations.

One such battle has been taking place in Bolivia. Neoliberalism came to Bolivia in 1985 with the government privatizing most state owned industries to foreign interests, cutting social services, and all but destroying the once powerful unions. Although manufacturing grew it became fragmented and decentralized into small workshops, permanent jobs dropping from 71% to just 29% of all employment between 1989 and 1996. As self-employment, temporary labor and subcontracting grew, wages were cut to half their previous value. (Olivera, p. 111 -113) The IMF, typically blind to the human toll, praised Bolivia as one of Latin America’s best examples of globalization. Writing on Bolivia’s submersion into global capital Alvaro Garcia Linera explained, “Today transnational capital, which has become the principal agent promoting a modern economy, controls the economic areas representing the greatest capital investment, the highest rate of profit, and the fullest articulation with the world market.” (Linera, p. 66)

When the government sold Bechtel the municipal water rights of Bolivia’s second largest city, Cochabamba, the people erupted in what became known as the Water Wars. The types of resistance that developed in this mass mobilization, and the following political battles over gas resources, are rich examples of alternative forms of democracy and social organization. The battle over Bolivia’s resources was not lead by the old industrial unions or a united front of political parties, but by the Coordinadora, a representative body of social movements and popular sectors organized through grassroots and participatory methods. Oscar Olivera, a key leader of the movement, points out, “The formation of the Coordinadora responded to the political vacuum uniting peasants, environmental groups, teachers, and blue and white-collar workers in the manufacturing sector...there could be no individual salvation. Social well-being would be achieved for everyone, or for no one at all.” (Olivera, p. 28)

The Coordinadora responded to the fragmentation of the working class with a new type of diverse and plural social solidarity, one that reflected the change of social relations under globalization. Industrial capitalism had massed workers into concentrated work sites creating a common experience and consciousness expressed through their unions and classed based political parties. Having lost these affiliations and common identities new collective forms arose in civil society based on neighborhood groups, small businessmen and market vendors, rank and file labor groups, peasant and craft unions, and professional and student associations. The Coordinadora acted as the central node, building a horizontal network of these mainly territorial based organizations. Each sector was organized into assemblies that met and sent spokespersons to represent their viewpoint in the Coordinadora. The meetings of representatives decided on strategy and wrote up communiqués, which were then presented at large-scale town meetings that at times were attended by fifty to seventy thousand people and finalized the decisions. After a number of mass mobilizations and intense street battles the government retreated and broke their contract with Bechtel. The Coordinadora had succeeded in creating an autonomist democratic space in civil society based on assembly-style communal politics.

But large collective actions and common decision making is often an aspect of mass, but temporary, social rebellions. The task now was to turn this newly won space into an institutional form with a permanent position in civil society. As intellectual activist Raquel Gutierrez-Aguilar wrote, "How could we sow the seeds of full autonomy in relation to the state through our proposals to regulate water...reclaiming decision-making and through it, of recovering alienated 'social wealth'." (Gutierrez-Aguilar, p. 55) Fellow activist Alvaro Garcia Linera was also concerned about the transitory nature of the mass movement. As he noted, "sometimes the Coordinadora consists of half a million inhabitants; at other times it can claim no more than one hundred active and permanent members. Perhaps the way of overcoming this organizational weakness is to consecrate, institutionalize, and symbolically ritualize the local and regional assemblies as institutionalized assemblies of the Coordinadora." (Linera, p. 83)

This was accomplished with an ambitious plan to create water committees in every neighborhood, independent of any political association. Creating more than 100 committees these groups, working with technical staff, solve a multitude of problems arising over services, sanitation, maintenance, environmental concerns and costs. In addition, as formal ownership of the water reverted back to SEMAPA, the municipal water company, the Coordinadora named the general manager and created room on the executive board for union representatives and professional organizations. As Gutierrez-Aguilar explains, the effort is "to convert SEMAPA into a socially owned and self-managed enterprise in which its property form would transcend existing legal provisions in order to make room for new means of management, decision-making, citizen participation, and social control" (Ibid. p. 60)

This process went on in a continual battle with the government that sought to bring SEMAPA under more formal state control. The social movement in Cochabamba understood this as a strategic battle, viewing the market as a question of democracy and a space to contest transnational power. The object is not to simply demand more resources from the state, but to occupy autonomist institutional positions that democratize decision-making power over social wealth. In this manner participatory management over state run services was connected to civil society and popular participation in the economy.

Another important aspect of the Water Wars was breaking free of the culture of cynicism, apathy and defeat. Neoliberalism had achieved ideological hegemony, isolating people and destroying their collective social belief that people could change and manage society. But the successful mass mobilization and victory of the people in Cochabamba created a consciousness that spread throughout Bolivia, helping to mobilize further battles over the recovery of gas resources and the extension of democracy. This is vitally important, wherein autonomist space creates new confidence and self-awareness that propels people to become agents of change and consciously build a historic bloc of popular forces.

But change in social consciousness is a long drawn-out process. Popular organizations always face the danger of becoming an appendage of state clientelism as mass participation withers. Under such circumstances leaders are often incorporated into the state as local mediators with the power to distribute resources. In addition, organizations based on specific social sectors often fail to develop lasting solidarity and a united political strategy. This can result in growing isolation and competition over social resources based solely on their immediate needs. This makes it easy for the state to incorporate some and attack others, controlling certain social movements to strengthen the state's hold over civil society. These are dynamics that need to be recognized as points of continuing conflict, particularly by those who tend to portray social movements as the only pure representation of grassroots democracy. In fact, under certain circumstances a popular democratic government may be the best vehicle to maintain a strategic plan for social justice and overcome the petty squabbles that can dominate local and regional groups.

In order to expand counter-hegemonic space from the local to the national level the Coordinadora proposed a Constituent Assembly. The Assembly would be as a mass participatory democratic challenge

to the traditional state apparatus composed of “citizen representatives elected by their neighborhood organizations, their urban or rural associations, their unions, their communes.”(Olivera, p136) According to Olivera the “Constituent Assembly is basically an instance of the political organization of civil society...not based on the reform of the political constitution of the existing state...but a general transformation of political institutions” for self-government. (Ibid. p 136-7) The use of democratic means to fashion revolutionary institutional space differs significantly from twentieth century socialist strategies that focused on the seizure of the existing state by armed insurrections. The effort here is to reappropriate democracy from a restricted and statist form with an expanded and participatory model. In part it is similar to worker councils or soviets that appeared in the early stages of previous socialist revolutions, before these grassroots structures became absorbed by the state.

But the autonomist strategy does not encompass all the social movements in Bolivia. Movement To Socialism (MAS) under the leadership of Evo Morales has a powerful presence and became focused on winning the presidency of the country. MAS developed out of the cocalero struggle against the militarized anti-drug campaign brought to Bolivia by the US. The coca growers symbolized a peasant movement fighting for economic survival, and came to occupy a militant and historical cultural position within Bolivian society. As an important sector in the social movement MAS launched electoral campaigns in 2002 that won the second most seats in congress and in the presidential race placed Morales just one percentage point behind winner Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. Lozada was consequently run out of office by the gas war rebellion, setting the stage for a new presidential campaign. While continuing to take part in the mass social mobilizations Morales concentrated the efforts of MAS on an electoral strategy for power. With Alvaro Garcia Linera as his running mate, Morales won a historic and decisive victory in December 2005 that many saw as the culmination of the mass movements that had forced two governments from office. El Alto, the poor and highly organized community sitting above La Paz, was an important stronghold of Morales support. As one resident commented, “We have all supported Evo. It is not just what he says. It is that this is his base and he knows us.” (Forero)

But the social movements were not fully united behind Morales’ campaign for president. There were serious debates over the best form of ownership of Bolivia’s gas resources, as well as questions over electoral strategy and political alliances. As Olivera commented, “What the social movements need to do now is to continue accumulating popular forces, as we have been doing since 2000, to build up our ability to pressure whatever government that comes. A Morales government would be less difficult to move, but it will still be difficult.” (Schultz) Many activists feel that Morales will not be able to fulfill his campaign promises because of Bolivia’s relationship to powerful oil and gas transnationals and the country’s international debt overseen by the IMF. Therefore the autonomy of the social movements acts as a necessary counterbalance on the government, pressuring the state to withstand the demands of transnational capitalism.

The lack of a common and coherent political project for the seizure of power is not isolated to Bolivia. In many countries there are clear tensions between those focused on creating autonomous space in civil society and those intent on winning political power by building mass electoral parties. In Mexico, the Zapatistas have sought to build democratic autonomy without competing for state power. As pointed out by Neil Harvey, “Their strategy is not to seize power and wield it over others, but to democratize power relations in every sphere of life.”(Harvey, p. 14) Their efforts have been twofold; to build over 30 autonomous municipalities among their base communities in the Chiapas jungle known as the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Councils of Good Government); and to seek alliances and dialogue with other social movements to create a diverse but common democratic agenda for social change. Meanwhile on the electoral front, the Party of Revolutionary Democracy (PRD) is set to win the presidency with the populist mayor of Mexico City, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, as their candidate. The left-center party was formed in a merger of the Mexican Communist Party, two socialist parties, and the left-wing of the

traditional ruling party, the PRI. The PRD has had their greatest success in states with large indigenous populations, winning governorships in Guerrero, Michoacan and in the Zapatista's own backyard of Chiapas. Yet the autonomist movement remains skeptical of the PRD's progressive legitimacy. As Zapatista spokesperson, Sub Comandante Marcos has stated, "Yesterday they were on the left, today they are on the center, where will they be tomorrow?" (Ramirez) But the Zapatista's have their critics too, as activist and writer Tariq Ali has argued "the Zapatistas have failed to make serious gains, because the proposal to 'change the world without taking power' is only a 'moral slogan' that does not pose any threat to dominant groups in Mexico or their foreign allies." Harvey, p. 14)

This same tension is seen in Brazil between the Landless Rural Worker's Movement (MST) and Lula's Workers Party (PT). The MST may well be Latin America's most powerful social movement with hundred of thousands of members. Founded in 1984 with the help of liberation theology church activists the MST is focused on the collective struggle for land and cooperative farms, having won 20 million acres for 350,000 families. They maintain a grassroots organization starting with groups of about ten families that constitute a "Base Nucleus," participatory local general assemblies, on up to regional, state and national levels. MST members voted in large numbers for the PT when Lula won the presidency, but the organization never joined the Party. As founding member Joao Pedro Stedile explains:

"From all we have learned from history, we realize that the health of the social movement depends on a large degree of political and ideological independence. We have always understood that only they who travel on their own feet and think with their own heads can go far. Therefore, we always insist that the MST and other social movements have to be autonomous in their relations with political parties, the government, the state, the Church and all other institutions... We are in permanent negotiations with the governments in search of our objectives. But we always set our own goals and methods." (Stedile, p. 25)

The MST has good cause for caution, land distribution under Lula's government declined sharply to the lowest level since the military government of 20 years before. Although the MST extended tactical support to Lula and limited their number of land occupations, after his first year in office they resumed widespread activities mobilizing in 20 states and marching on the federal capital demanding action.

These different strategies for social change between state and civil society naturally create tensions, and at times bitter disagreements. Activists in civil society often label those involved in the electoral arena as untrustworthy reformists or worse, as traitors to the mass democratic project. On the otherhand, party militants getting out the vote see autonomists as unwilling to confront the real problems of power and responsibility. Meanwhile, millions of mobilized people participate in multiple forms of social organizations as well as vote for left candidates in local and national elections. Perhaps more pragmatic than their ideologically driven leaders, a vast majority of workers and poor see no problem with participating in both forms of activism. In fact, this is an essential aspect of the democratic dialectic.

The tension between the two strategies, state power versus autonomous civil society and what can be accomplished in either political realm, will and should continue to be a contradiction within any truly dynamic democratic society. Establishing counter-hegemonic positions within the state and society are both necessary, with both having their strengths and dangers of co-option and corruption. Sometimes they will compliment and strengthen each other; sometimes their interaction will reflect different needs, perspectives, pressures and strategies. Since the ultimate goal is to restrict the state until society can be govern by the producers themselves, the dialectic is solved in the long run by a synthesis to a fully democratic and participatory civil society that ultimately replaces the state. Or as Antonio Gramsci put it, "the State's goal is its own end, its own disappearance, in other words the re-absorption of political society into civil society." (Gramsci p. 253) That, to say the least, is a very long-term project, the results of which are unknowable. So in considering the historic transition, understanding the dynamics of the

democratic dialectic becomes a strategic orientation for guiding social change. There is a necessary democratic linkage between state and society, only by recognizing this unity of opposites and through understanding its inherent contradictions can an appropriate transitional strategy be created.

The State and Change from Above

The most exciting example of change from the top is the government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, which has pushed a radical agenda at home and abroad. Chavez was elected with the overwhelming support of the countries' poor, which constitutes 80% of the population. His party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MRV), has won a large majority in congress and most of the provincial governors and local offices throughout the country. One of the government's important first acts was to rewrite the nation's constitution. While private property was protected, the constitution extended fundamental political, social and economic rights in favor of the poor. In a campaign of political education, committees were formed throughout working class barrios to study the new constitution. This was an important opening in the political culture of Venezuela, convincing many that they held a personal stake in the government.

When Chavez was overthrown in a coup it was the massive mobilization from the urban barrios that saved his government and brought him back to power. A radical awakening of consciousness over questions of democratic inclusion and defending the constitution propelled people into the streets. Rather than overthrowing the state, (the model of twentieth century revolutions), people fought to defend the state and save legally structured democracy. This experience is mirrored in Bolivia where the demand for a constituent assembly to rewrite the countries' laws and create a new democratic framework is a strategic aim of the social movement. People's aspirations for social justice are being articulated through structural participatory democratic forms that create institutional positions of strength and act as a convergence point for a new historic bloc. This should be noted as a characteristic of the new revolutionary left in the twenty-first century, a marked departure from the model of vanguard parties where platforms were pronounced in party manifestos that assumed to speak for the entire working class.

The temporary coup, followed by a hard fought two-month strike in the oil industry, radicalized Chavez and his movement. This process was similar to the effect of the US sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion that radicalized Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Revolutionary paths are always defined in part by the opposition, the two opposing sides linked in a process of action and reaction. It was only after the failed invasion that Castro declared a socialist direction for Cuba, as Chavez did after three attempts to oust him from office. His intent was made clear at the World Social Forum in Brazil where Chavez stated, "We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one that puts humans, not machines or the state, ahead of everything." (Ellner, 9-05, p. 24) But the process in Venezuela is significantly different from the Cuban experience. Most capitalists have not fled the country but continue to operate their corporations and make profits, and Venezuela is firmly linked to the transnational economy rather than niched into some socialist bloc. In fact, Chavez signed a new contract with Chevron-Texaco in the middle of the oil strike by his pro-US opposition. Furthermore, there have been no nationalizations nor is socialism mentioned in the new constitution.

As Latin American scholar Steve Ellner explains, the "approach envisions an extended process of revolutionary change which is without precedent in history and which some claim may take several decades to complete. The end result will be a complete replacement of old structures created by the Chavista government and movement...replacing the current capitalist system with a mixed economy or association of medium-sized cooperatives." (Ellner, 4-05, pp 171-72) Ellner adds that the Chavistas are committed to a "peaceful democratic revolution (and) have ruled out the suppression of the existing

institutions controlled by their adversaries in economic, political and state spheres and instead opted for parallelism.” (ibid, p.187)

But the opposition has plunged the country into repeated crises, initiating confrontations that they continue to lose. In response, participation and mobilization have been keys to the continuing battle for change, with an expansion of programs and goals after every major confrontation. In consolidating the transformational process, radical forces in state positions have united with social movements to help build revolutionary space throughout civil society. This is where the PT and ANC failed, causing political contradictions to develop between the state and organized social sectors. But in Venezuela the link between the state and social movements creates a revolutionary character and potential lacking in countries where autonomist power remains isolated from the government.

Of course autonomist activists have cause for caution, twentieth century revolutions used unions, community organizations and peasant associations as transmission belts for state led projects and party control. As University of Havana professor Jorge Luis Acanda Gonzalez explains, “With the advent of the ‘institutionalization process’ (civil society) was transformed into a paternalistic top-down political system based on the all-embracing presence of the state. The state occupied nearly all aspects of social life: livelihoods were inextricably linked to its presence, and it played a key role in ideological production displacing the (church and the market).” (Gonzalez p. 35) As in Cuba, there is a danger that the Venezuelan state may come to dominate and consume the independent role of the social movements. But the main thrust of the revolutionary project so far has been to decentralize state power into the hands of civil society, using the state to guard and guide the process.

One good example of this dynamic is to compare the autonomist cooperative movement in Argentina with the state facilitated cooperative movement in Venezuela. When the Argentine economy collapsed after being looted by neo-liberal speculators there were protests and mobilizations by almost every sector of society. One result was the takeover of about 200 factory enterprises turning them into worker-run and managed cooperatives after they had been abandoned by their owners. In addition, self-managed neighborhood and food cooperatives arose in different communities as a means of survival in an economy that had all but ceased to function. All told the various autonomist cooperatives encompassed over 10,000 people. While workers quickly proved they could profitably operate their factories the former owners and government challenged their efforts. Some enterprises won legal recognition from the state, but this was never an easy process. Other worker cooperatives had to defend themselves from police attacks and fought to remain operating their factories.

As examples of courage, initiative and solidarity the worker cooperatives have been inspiring, but they have failed to develop into a widespread movement within the working class. When anarchist activist and intellectual Michael Albert interviewed the president of a glass manufacturing cooperative about the possibility that workers in traditionally owned plants would take over and run their factories the president “without hesitating said no.” Pursuing the point by asking members of the cooperative council why they couldn’t convey their experience and motivate others to act, Albert writes, the president “shrugged, he didn’t see it as likely. Worse, it wasn’t on his agenda. His horizon of interest was his own plant and not beyond. Others agreed.” Albert, who visited many of Argentina’s enterprise cooperatives, writes “Perhaps the weakest feature of the Argentine movement, is the insularity of each firm and the workers’ seeming lack of desire to organize non-recuperated firms by demanding changes in them too.” What Albert found was not a mass autonomist movement for revolutionary change, but worker’s turning to each other and relying on their mutual efforts in their common fight for survival. (Albert, ‘05)

On the otherhand, in Venezuela there are 83,769 cooperatives active in every sector of the economy with some 946,000 members. The new constitution defines cooperatives as key economic institutions for mass

participation and state decentralization. Taking advantage of state run educational missions over 195,000 students have been trained in technical and managerial subjects and upon graduation created 7,592 new cooperatives. These cooperatives join together to design projects and become part of Endogenous Development Zones where they receive credit, technical support and physical space. Newly formed lending agencies such as the Women's Bank and the People's Bank help to facilitate this process. As of 2005 there were 115 active zones covering 960 cooperatives, 75 percent in agricultural, 15 percent in industrial enterprises and ten percent in tourism. The cooperative enterprises are not state run employment programs, but are expected to make profits and pay-off their loans. While most production is geared towards providing for a stronger and sustainable internal market, the Ministry of Popular Economy facilitates the integration of cooperatives with small and medium size companies to create production chains that can contract with foreign buyers. Thus a parallel economic structure is being created alongside the traditional market. (C. Harnecker)

In addition to the new cooperatives in the Development Zones, many state run industries have moved to co-management or cooperative management forms. Efforts have also included urban neighborhood organizations in the planning and decision making process over municipal public services. This includes supervision, prioritizing projects and hiring cooperatives to carry out the work. To promote the social economy the government also hands out land titles and work contracts to those who self-organize into cooperatives, promoting collectively owned production capacity. All this is directed towards generating wealth in an egalitarian and internally sustainable fashion in a country where oil makes up 30 percent of the GDP, 50 percent of the state income and 80 percent of exports.

Oil wealth, as in many countries, created a corrupt political culture in Venezuela. Although owned by the state, the petroleum industry only benefited the elite, wealth flowing into the hands of those who controlled the industry and government. As Jorge Giordani, Minister of Planning and Development noted, "Everything has been 'Mama State, Papa State, give me oil money.' To organize people is extremely hard." (Parenti) Creating a counter-hegemonic culture will be a long transformative struggle that must be based in an alternative economic project. The strategy of the Bolivarian revolution is to support the cooperative movement to build economic strength and develop a counter ideology and culture. From this position of strength the popular movement can contest and eventual replace the neo-liberal capitalist model with a decentralized system based on a social market economy. Those who believe the Chavez government will fall when oil prices drop fail to perceive the rich web of organizations sinking roots in civil society.

Of course there are many old habits in both the state and market that can undermine the revolutionary process. The state may turn the cooperatives into a cliental relationship demanding political support in return for economic support. Easy credit and poor technical and managerial skills may lead to economic failure or state support that turns into debt and deficits. And problems of unlawful accounting, undemocratic decision-making and managers excluding members from their share of profits have occurred. (Ibid) Such internal contradictions are not uncommon in the history of cooperative movements. And debates always exist over internal organization, membership and market strategies.

But what is also evident in Venezuela, as throughout Latin America, is a strategy by social movements to become producers rather than just groups marching to demand more services. Both social and state actors have made the market contested territory to develop an alternative model. Counter-hegemony needs to be based in a different set of labor relations as represented in the cooperative movement and by economic democracy. Not only is there a need to build an alternative economic vision, but practical alternative economic activities that generate new social relations. Social movements need to go beyond the political struggle between civil society and the state to include the market, while state actors need to use their institutional power to decentralize economic decision making into a participatory democratic process.

Given the difficulties of autonomist, state and market strategies for social transformation we can see that no easy answers exist, no silver bullet, in the quest for a just society. The relationships between state, civil society and market are deeply complex, each having its own dynamic while interconnected and modifying the others. The idea that any one theory or strategy can encompass and account for the whole of these complexities assumes a narrow and reductionist approach. Only views that recognize the constant interchange and overdeterminations of social forces can hope to offer the tools for a fruitful analysis. Once we recognize the dialectical character of the relationships we can begin to develop political strategies that make room for historic transformational processes that encompass broad social forces that condition each other. This allows us to see the necessary ebbs and flows between institutional structures and social movements, each with strength and weaknesses, each with their historic moment of influence and importance. The democratic dialectic is recognition of this process.

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