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Latin America

Assessing the Pink Tide

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Pink Tide governments delivered much-needed reforms. But they also defanged the movements that brought them to power.

When Ecuador gained independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, the country did not launch a social revolution that would overturn colonial society's racism and inequality. Instead, the elite descendants of Spanish conquistadores now ruled on their own behalf rather than for the Spanish crown. For those beneath them, much remained as it had been.

Thus a popular slogan of the early republican period emerged in the graffiti lining the walls of Quito, the capital city: the last day of despotism, and the first day of the same; or, as [Luis Macas](#), a leading indigenous activist remembered it in a 2010 interview with me, the last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.

This expression captures something essential about the first decade and a half of twenty-first-century Latin American politics. Indeed, some on the Left have celebrated the most recent period of the region's history as Latin America's Second Independence, referring to the region's relative autonomy from the domination of the United States and the crudest dictates of orthodox neoliberalism.

But the nineteenth-century Ecuadorian slogan resonates in ways that suggest a more somber view. At the end of the latest left experiments in Latin America, the chasm between what this challenge to neoliberalism promised and what political-economic strategies left and center-left governments actually adopted is clearer than ever.

From the Streets to the State

Latin American social movements between 2000 and 2005 emphasized direct action, grassroots participatory democracy, and the de-professionalization of politics. The assembly form became a privileged site of deliberative decision-making. Popular organizations combined confronting the state with building new forms of self-governance that prefigured the post-neoliberal, and in some cases post-capitalist, societies they hoped to forge.

When progressive parties assumed the mantle of state leadership over the mid-2000s, however, the social movements were limited to "subaltern participation," which Mabel Thwaites Rey and Hernán Ouyiña [define](#) as the pacifying incorporation of popular sectors into the gears of the capitalist state, rather than "autonomous and antagonistic participation," in which they maintain their capacity to disrupt and to lay the groundwork for emancipatory transformation. The necessary struggle *against, within, and beyond* the state transformed into a moderated struggle captured by the state.

Social movements lost sight of the connection between specific popular organization dynamics and the revolutionary horizon of transforming capitalist society in its totality. Modest reforms and increases in consumptive capacities became ends in themselves, rather than the basis for more audacious structural ruptures with the existing order. The new left governments channeled the momentum of social change from below rather than encouraging an ongoing rebalance of class forces that would favor the laboring classes.

Left governments cannot capture a capitalist state's actually existing apparatuses and straightforwardly retool them

for any purpose besides the reproduction of capitalist society. That, however, does not mean that we should think of the state as merely an instrument of the bourgeoisie. Within a specific national territory, and within the limits of capitalist reproduction, the state represents the balance of class forces. The [positive aspects](#) of state services – public education, health care, and so on – are the accumulated legacy of past popular struggle, always unevenly achieved and [under threat of reversal](#). Ultimately, the state cannot be transformed from within given the fundamental role it plays in reproducing dominant class relations and the mode of capitalist exploitation.

There may be a revolutionary road to post-capitalism that begins with left forces assuming electoral office, but, as [Panagiotis Sotiris](#) has argued, such a process would quickly lead to an organic crisis of the state and fierce counterattack by bourgeois forces. What began with elections would then become something else altogether.

Anticapitalist revolution requires the purposeful creation of new forms of solidarity and self-management, the institutionalization of new social and political forms of struggle, and the extension of modalities of popular power from below, outside of, and against the bourgeois state, even if left parties and social movements do participate in the electoral terrain of competition.

With the exhaustion of the current progressive cycle in Latin America, the political moment will likely become much darker before it gets brighter. If, however, today's popular movements – those [fighting the parliamentary coup](#) in Brazil, or [taking on the Macri government](#) in the streets of Argentina, or aligned against the authoritarian government in Honduras – presage struggles to come, the tide will turn again, creating conditions more favorable to the popular sectors' self-activity.

But what form this next left assumes in the medium term, and whether it can transcend inherited habits and institutional patterns, will depend in part on its ability to ruthlessly assess the last fifteen years.

Passive Revolution

Gramsci [describes](#) passive revolution as a period marked by the unequal and dialectical combination of restorative and transformative tendencies.

Transformative dynamics work to change social relations, but these changes are ultimately limited. The fundamental structure of social domination persists, even if its political expressions have been altered.

The last day of oppression, and the first day of the same.

The specific class content of passive revolutions varies within certain limits – that is, popular demands (the transformative tendency) are incorporated to different degrees within a structure that ultimately sustains the foundations of the status quo ante (the restorative tendency). Passive revolutions involve neither the total restoration of the old order nor radical revolution.

Instead, they generate a dialectic of revolution/restoration, transformation/preservation. Capacities for social mobilization from below are co-opted, contained, or selectively repressed, while the dominant classes' political initiative is restored. Meanwhile, conservative reforms appear in the guise of impulses emerging from below, thereby achieving the dominated classes' passive consensus.

Rather than an instantaneous restoration, the balance of forces changes at a molecular level until the capacities for popular self-organization and self-activity are completely drained through co-optation, bureaucratization, and so on.

This process guarantees passivity to the new order and controls what mobilization occurs, if not encouraging complete demobilization.

At the end of Latin America's most recent progressive cycle, we can discern the sharpest periods of transformation and of restoration over the last fifteen years of left resurgence as well as characterize the epoch since the late 1990s as a whole.

Explaining the End of the Cycle

Some have responded to the fading of center-left hegemony in Latin America with denial. Broadly speaking, two versions of this position dominate. First, from a social-democratic perspective, the Right's resurgence — evident in [Mauricio Macri's 2015 election](#) in Argentina, the conservative opposition's [congressional victory](#) in Venezuela that same year, Evo Morales's [failed attempt](#) to run for a third consecutive term as Bolivian president, Rafael Correa's decision [not to seek reelection](#) in Ecuador, and [Brazil's parliamentary coup](#) a year ago — appears as a string of relatively superficial setbacks.

“For the past 15 years,” Mark Weisbrot writes in [an emblematic intervention](#), “Washington has sought to get rid of Latin America's left governments; but its efforts have really succeeded, so far, only in the poorest and weakest countries: Haiti (2004 and 2011), Honduras (2009), and Paraguay (2012).” The region has more independence than ever, and the poor are better off now than at any time in recent decades.

The Latin American left, Weisbrot argues, overturned economic and political relations with the behemoth to the north, constituting a “second independence” after it secured freedom from Spain and Portugal two centuries ago. Riding on this legacy, Weisbrot predicts that the region's progressives are “likely to remain the dominant force in the region for a long time to come.”

Such a perspective sees the recent close-call results of the second round of Ecuador's presidential contest as further evidence of Pink Tide continuity. Correa's successor, Lenín Moreno [won](#) 51.6 percent of the vote, defeating retrograde conservative Guillermo Lasso, who garnered 48.8 percent. Downplayed is the fact that Correa's government shifted to the right in recent years, was in open conflict with the indigenous movement and public sector unions, and was suffering a decline in popularity as the economy sunk into serious recession with the end of the oil boom.

In the 2006 and 2013 general elections, Correa won in the first round with 57 percent of the popular vote. In 2017, Moreno, Correa's vice president from 2007 to 2013 and clearly a continuity candidate, won only 39 percent in the first round — falling shy of the 40 percent needed to avoid a second round, despite a fractured right-wing opposition. While less calamitous than a Lasso victory would have been, it is very likely that Moreno will introduce new austerity measures, prioritize debt repayment, and maintain Correa's development program of capitalist modernization in the extractive sectors of mining and oil.

Social democrats never believed that revolutionary change was possible or even desirable in twenty-first century Latin America. As a result, they have interpreted the shift to the center of the political spectrum by left and center-left governments over the last several years as an adaptation to reality, a prudent course of moderation. These governments and the social movements that support them must accept the inevitable and make a virtue of necessity, [following](#) Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's and Dilma Rousseff's lead in Brazil. The only possible alternative to neoliberal capitalism is a regulated and humane capitalism — other desires are either nefarious or naïve.

A second denialist track claims a certain Marxist pedigree. It emphasizes the state's centrality as an agent of social

change and aligns itself closely with the Bolivian, Cuban, and Venezuelan governments, and sometimes to those in Uruguay, Nicaragua, and, until recently, Brazil and Argentina. The Left's apparent setbacks appear, from this point of view, as symptoms of the natural ebbs and flows of the revolutionary process — part of the anticipated dynamics of advance and retreat, unsurprising unless one has innocently expected a linear revolutionary ascent.

This group interprets the growing tensions between left governments and social movements — as long as they stay in agreement with the government's objectives — as creative and revolutionary impulses that ultimately help transformative processes mature. The state managers and loyalists in these administrations reduce independent opposition from the Left or from indigenous organizations to machinations of imperialist powers or the domestic right. Indeed, they see left-indigenous movements as little more than the willing allies or useful idiots of empire.

Despite periodic hiccups and policy reversals, left governments are understood to be building advanced, industrial capitalism in the region, thereby creating the conditions for a slow transition to socialism. Such change does not drop from the sky, nor is it achieved over night. The transitional phase will last decades, perhaps centuries.

Both of these narratives misunderstand the Latin American context. The global economic crisis made a delayed landing in the region, and the center-left's hegemony is now in sustained and protracted retreat. New right-wing formations are appearing, but they cannot offer an alternative hegemonic project.

This is a novel period of political impasse, structured by deep continuities in underlying patterns of regional accumulation and Latin America's still-subordinate position as primary commodity producer in the international division of labor. A balanced assessment of these progressive governments and the social movements that preceded them cannot restrict itself to unidimensional criticisms of American intervention and belligerent right-wing movements, even when these represent crucial components of the story.

Instead, we might start with the Latin American left's trajectory since the early 1990s, paying particular attention to the shifting balance of forces between the popular classes, ruling classes, and imperial forces across the last twenty-five years. From a nadir in the early 1990s, an extra-parliamentary left gradually renewed itself during the economic crisis of 1998–2002, which eventually became a political crisis for right-wing governments throughout much of South America.

This movement left's radicalism, particularly in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, was subsequently moderated in various ways as movement actors began participating in elections, center-left and left governments rose in the mid-2000s, and China's dynamic accumulation drove a worldwide commodity boom. Progressive governments consolidated into what Eduardo Gudynas [calls](#) the “compensatory state,” in which wealth is redistributed but does not change society's underlying class structure or seriously confront profitability and property regimes — a model that depends on strong commodity prices.

The global economic crisis initially had a relatively weak impact on the region, particularly in South America. But by 2012, the tide had shifted, and crisis rolled through the region. With a downturn in commodity prices, easy rent for redistribution disappeared, and center-left governments became austerity managers, alienating both the sections of capital that had reconciled themselves to progressive rule and the regimes' traditional social bases.

This dual retraction of support provoked a decline in center-left hegemony and the uneven appearance of new right-wing social and political movements. Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela are prominent exemplars of this new reality.

Looking Back

These center-left governments achieved myriad social gains. Alternative regional integration projects began to develop in opposition to American dominance. The Argentine Supreme Court declared laws that granted immunity to leading figures of the dictatorship unconstitutional, and constituent assemblies in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador inserted some transformative elements into their countries' new constitutions.

Politically, the contrast with the repressive governments in Colombia, Peru, Paraguay, Honduras, and Mexico is stark. Ideologically, anti-imperialist discourse was revived, and, in some places, strategic debates over socialism and paths of transition to post-capitalism proliferated.

Progressive governments used the bonanza of export rent to fund targeted social policies for the poorest social strata, to increase and sustain employment rates (albeit typically in insecure and low-paid jobs), and to boost domestic consumption. The popular classes' living conditions measurably improved. Poverty went down, and income inequality fell slightly. (That said, this also happened in some countries in the region led by right-wing governments, as a cursory comparison of International Monetary Fund figures for Colombia and Brazil reveals, and the region remains the most unequal in the world.)

The pace of privatizations slowed and was even reversed in some economic sectors in a few countries. Spending on basic social services and infrastructure in poor urban neighborhoods and marginalized rural areas increased. These governments expanded access to basic free education and, in some cases, democratized access to universities.

In the words of Ecuadorian sociologist [Pablo Ospina Peralta](#), Latin American progressivism offered "something," however minimal, in the face of the "nothing" that dominated in the decades of neoliberalism that preceded it.

But, as the global economic crisis seriously began to pinch state revenues, even these slight gains were slowed or reversed. As sociologist Franck Gaudichaud [observes](#):

[The] social, political, and economic cycle of medium duration seems to be slowly exhausting itself, although in multiform and nonlinear ways. With their real (but relative) advances, their difficulties and important limitations, the different experiences of very distinct progressive governments of the region . . . appear to be running up against significant endogenous problems, robust conservative powers (national as well as global), and lack of direction and unresolved strategic dilemmas.

Looking Ahead

A new period is opening up, likely to feature more intense forms of right-wing rule that, lacking societal consent, will rely on militarized and repressive domination. But the Right cannot solve the structural problems underlying the region's economics. This new period will be marked by economic, social, and political instability, by renewed interventionism from the United States, and by deteriorating living conditions for the majority of Latin American populations.

Progressive governments are increasingly trapped between popular demands for the continuation of recent social gains and the intensifying discontent of foreign and domestic capitals that had learned to live with center-left hegemony when there seemed to be no other option.

In the present scenario, none of these governments have the ideological, organizational, or political capacity to take the kind of audacious steps against capital — like nationalizing banks, monopolizing trade, enacting agrarian reform and mass employment schemes, enforcing environmental regulations, boosting popular consumption, and controlling money laundering — that might realign them with their popular bases of support. These "governments fear popular

mobilization of their own bases of support,” Guillermo Almeyra [notes](#), “more than being toppled by the Right, which is on the offensive.”

The cycle of progressivism in Latin America has demonstrated that the mass mobilizations against neoliberalism in the early part of this century and the subsequent occupation of state apparatuses by progressive governments of different shades cannot structurally transform society, the state, and the economy on their own. Indeed, the occupation of the state often domesticated social movements and tamed their desires by partially incorporating their demands into an underlying framework of continuity.

This observation hardly vindicates the radical autonomist view of changing the world [without taking power](#), of ignoring state power and buckling down in defensive islands while the Right governs the sea. The new situation demands a sober assessment of the period, an interrogation of established revolutionary truths, and ongoing, open-ended discussions of the strategic lessons to be drawn.

“When major historical processes come to an end, and in turn major political defeats transpire,” Raúl Zibechi [explains](#), “confusion and despondency set in, desire intermingles with reality, and the most coherent analytical frameworks blur.”

[Jacobin](#)

PS:

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