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Latin America

The end of a golden age?

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After participating in the international colloquium that we coordinated last June on “Progressive governments and post-neoliberalism in Latin America: the end of a golden age?” at the University of Grenoble, France, Frank Gaudichaud spoke to the sociologists Edgardo Lander (Venezuela) and Miriam Lang (Ecuador).

In the recent period, there have been many debates about the end of the cycle of progressive and national-popular governments in Latin America, or rather their possible reflux and loss of political hegemony. What do you think about this debate? At this point, can we think that this debate about the end of the cycle is over? And, what can we call the current conjuncture in the face of the 1999-2015 progressive experience?

Edgardo Lander: Indeed, this is a very intense debate, especially in Latin America, because there had been many expectations about the possibilities of profound transformation in these societies after the victory of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998. This was the starting point of a process of political change that led to the majority of South American governments being identified with a progressive, or left, orientation, in several versions. These expectations of transformations that would lead to post-capitalist societies posed severe challenges, both because of the negative experience of the socialisms of the last century, and because of new realities such as climate change and the limits of planet Earth that needed to be faced. Thinking about transformation today necessarily means something very different from what it meant in the last century. When the discourse of socialism had practically disappeared from political grammar in much of the world, it reappeared in this new historical moment in South America. Especially from the struggles of the indigenous peoples, in some of these processes a profound questioning of fundamental aspects of what had been the socialism of the twentieth century seems to be incorporated in a very central way. They are present in a central way, in part of the imagination of transformation, issues such as pluriculturality, other forms of relationship with the other networks of life, notions of rights of nature and conceptions of good living, which pointed to a possibility of transformation that would be able to account for the limitations of previous processes and open new horizons to address the new conditions of humanity and the planet.

So, you're talking about the initial period, starting at the beginning of the 2000s, when resistance from below was combined with the creation of socio-political dynamics which were more or less disruptive and post-neoliberal according to the case, which managed to emerge at the national electoral and governmental levels.

EL: Yes, a period in which extraordinary hopes were generated that radical transformations of society had begun. In the cases of Ecuador and Bolivia, the new governments were the result of processes of accumulation of forces of movements and social organizations in struggle against neoliberal governments. The experience of the indigenous uprising in the Ecuadorian case and the water war in Bolivia were expressions of societies in movement in which social sectors - that were not the most typical in terms of the political action of the left - played leading roles. It was a plebeian emergence, of previously invisible social sectors, indigenous, peasants, urban people, who came to occupy a central place in the political arena. This generated extraordinary expectations.

However, with time, severe obstacles appeared. In spite of the high-sounding discourses, important sectors of the left that had leadership roles in these processes of struggle had not subjected the experience of twentieth-century socialism to a sufficiently critical reflection. Many of the old ways of understanding leadership, the party, the vanguard, state relations with society, economic development, relations with the rest of nature, as well as the weight of monocultural Eurocentric worldviews and patriarchy, were present in these projects of change. The historical colonial forms of insertion in the international division of labour and nature were deepened. It is evident that any

project that seeks to overcome capitalism in the current world necessarily has to confront the severe challenges posed by the profound civilizational crisis that humanity is experiencing today, in particular the hegemonic logic of the endless growth of modernity that has led us to exceed the supportive capacity of the planet and is undermining the conditions that make possible the reproduction of life.

The experience of the so-called progressive governments came at a time when neoliberal globalization was accelerating, and China was becoming the factory of the world and the main planetary economy. This produced a qualitative leap in the demand and price of commodities: energy goods, minerals and agro-industry products such as soybeans. Under these conditions, each of the progressive governments chose to finance the social transformations proposed through the deepening of predatory extractivism. This had not only the obvious implication that the productive structure of these countries was not questioned but deepened in terms of the neo-colonial forms of insertion in the international division of labour and nature. It also emphasized the role of the state as the main recipient of income from the income produced through the export of commodities. With this, beyond what the constitutional texts say about plurinationality and interculturality, a conception of transformation prevailed, focused primarily on the state and on the identification of the state with the common good. This inevitably led to conflicts around territories, indigenous and peasant rights, struggles for defence and access to water and resistance to mega-mining. These popular and territorial struggles have been seen by these governments as threats to the national project represented, designed and directed by the state as a representative of the national interest. To carry out their neo-developmental projects, despite this resistance, governments have resorted to repression and are assuming increasingly authoritarian tendencies. By defining from the centre what the priorities are and seeing everything that confronts that priority as a threat, a logic of the state's reasoning that requires undermining the resistance is installed.

In the case of Bolivia and Ecuador, this led to a certain demobilization of the main social organizations, as well as divisions promoted by the government of the movements that generated fragmentation of their social fabric and which weakened the democratic transforming energy that characterized them.

Faced with this analysis, and in particular with regard to reasons of state, the militants and intellectuals who participated in these processes in the governments and the progressive pro-government parties affirmed that, finally, the only way to build an authentic post-neoliberal path in Latin America was to “recuperate” the state first, thanks to the social-plebeian mobilizations that displaced the old party elites and, after overwhelming anti-oligarchic electoral victories, to begin, starting from the state (but with ties to those below), to distribute and reconstitute the possibility of an alternative to “real” neoliberalism.

Miriam Lang: Before starting to address this, I would like to take up again what Edgardo says, because the term end of cycle suggests a little looking at the whole region based on the Argentine and Brazilian experience where the right actually came back. However, the most appropriate reading would be to see how the transformation project has changed during the progressive period and why now we are in another situation than 10 or 15 years ago, also in the countries where there are still progressives in the government, like Bolivia or Ecuador. I refer to what some call the transformation of the transformers, and also to the diversity of political tendencies that make up these governments, where really the transformative lefts are no longer necessarily hegemonic. But these processes have become projects of successful modernization of capitalist relations and insertion into the world market.

At the end of the day, you have a clear critical stance on the international division of labour, commodities, the use of extractivism, on the problem of the state (often authoritarian and clientelist until today), phenomena that, by the way, did not disappear and even consolidated on several levels with the *progresismos*. But you do not mention here the bolsa familia, the significant reduction of poverty and even of inequality, the incorporation of subaltern social classes into politics, the reconstruction of systems of basic services, of public health, the spectacular growth of infrastructures and so on, during the decade of the golden age of progressive governments. In short, if I become a spokesperson for the logic of Bolivian vice-president GarcÃ-a

Linares, you would be these critical cafeteria intellectuals that he denounces for not having a real empathy for the popular sectors and their daily living conditions. It is at least a classic of the argumentation of *progresismo* and the current debate against the critical left.

ML: That depends a little on the lens with which each of us looks at reality. It is necessary to see, for example, in the Bolivarian constitution and in the Ecuadorian constitution, the transformation project delineated there that went far beyond the reduction of poverty. All that was accumulated from the previous social struggles went far beyond a little distribution of income, which may indeed have the day to day lives of many people easier, at least in the years of high prices of the hydrocarbons. But there is also an aspect that goes beyond poverty statistics. We can say that according to the poverty line, so many people have left it and that is perfect; but we can also look a little closer and say: what kind of poverty are we talking about? In Latin America, the measurement of poverty by income and by consumption still prevails, that is a fact that assesses to what extent a household participates in the capitalist way of life and, possibly, says little about the quality of life that exists in this household. It ignores the dimensions of subsistence economies, the dimensions of the quality of human relations and so on. To what extent could people really express their needs according to their context? To what extent have these redistributive policies strengthened or territorially expanded the logic of the capitalist market in countries where a large part of the population, because of the enormous cultural diversity that exists, still did not fully live under capitalist precepts?

We could say that this diversity of ways of life constituted an important transforming potential for the horizons of overcoming capitalism. Even if we look at the ecological conditions of the planet, instead of being labelled as poor and underdeveloped, many peasant, indigenous, black or urban-popular communities could have been seen as an example of how to consume less and be better satisfied. On the other hand, what happened is precisely what I call the “device of underdevelopment”; in the context of the “eradication of poverty” they are told: this way of life that requires so little money is unworthy, you have to resemble the urban, capitalist, consumer population, you have to manage money, and the form of exchange is the capitalist market, there are no other valid forms of exchange. The so-called financial literacy, which was part of the progressive policy against poverty, helped financial capital to establish new credit markets for the poorest, often at high interest rates. And the famous inclusion to consumption means in the end, we have populations in debt for consumption, which have generated needs that perhaps they did not have before. That is, it depends a bit on how one looks at these issues. It is a problem of values and perspective, of how we want future generations to live. It is not only about democratizing consumption, but the commitment was to build a world that is sustainable for at least 5, 6, 7 generations later, and I have serious doubts if this way of eradicating poverty has contributed to these ends.

EL: In the Venezuelan case, the use of oil rent in a different way from how it had been used historically had enormous consequences during the first decade of the Chávez government. Social spending came to represent something like 70 percent of the national budget. This public spending on health, education, food, housing and social security meant a profound transformation in the living conditions of the majority of the population. Venezuela, which, like the rest of Latin America, has historically been a country of profound inequalities, not only significantly reduced poverty levels (measured by monetary income), but also managed to reduce inequality in a noticeable way. The ECLAC pointed out that Venezuela became, together with Uruguay, one of the two least unequal countries on the continent. This is a very important transformation that is expressed in such vital matters as the reduction of infant mortality and the increase in the weight and height of children. There are not secondary issues.

On the other hand, this was accompanied from the political point of view with grassroots organizing processes in which millions of people participated. Some of the most important social policies were designed in such a way that in order to function they required the organization of the people. The best example of this was the Barrio Adentro Mission, a primary health service with wide coverage in popular sectors throughout the country, carried out with the priority participation of Cuban doctors. A program that represented the possibility of other ways of understanding public policies in a non-clientelist way that demanded the participation of the people.

Important steps in the transformation of the health system in the country began with the Barrio Adentro Mission. We went from a medical system that was fundamentally hospital-based to a decentralized system with primary services located in the popular sectors themselves. From a situation in which, for example, a dehydrated child in a Caracas neighbourhood in the middle of the night had to be moved, outside public transport hours, to the nearest hospital, you move to a situation in which the primary care module, where the doctor lives, is a short distance from your home and at any time you can knock the door and be attended.

Barrio Adentro was conceived as a project that required the participation of the community to function. The doctor himself, especially if it was a Cuban doctor who knew neither the neighbourhood nor the city, could only work with the support of the community. This involved, among other things, a census of the community, the identification of pregnant women, children with malnutrition problems, the elderly, and in general people with special requirements. This constitutes a conception of social policy completely different from a gift that comes from above because it makes the community a coparticipant of its functioning. There was an extraordinarily rich potential in this dynamic.

So, this constituent and disruptive potential of the process was depleted? Is that what you are saying?

EL: During the years of the Bolivarian process not only was the productive structure of the country not altered, but the country became more highly dependent on oil exports. Public policies directed towards the popular sectors have been characterized at all times by their distributive nature, with a very limited impulse of alternative productive processes to oil extractivism. This dependence on high oil revenues imposed severe limits on the Bolivarian process.

The dynamic character, encouragement of popular organizational processes of public policies, was running out for different reasons. In the first place, because not all the Missions (generic name of the different social policies), had the wealth that they had in some areas such as literacy programs and Barrio Adentro. But also because of the fact that the larger-scale organizational processes that were organized, up to the Communal Councils and the Communes, were processes in which there was always a strong tension between the tendencies of self-government, autonomy, self-organization and so on, and the fact that almost all the projects that could be carried out from these organizations have depended on the transfer of resources that come from above, from some state institution. This has generated a recurrent tension between the political-financial control from above and the possibilities of more autonomous self-organization. These tensions operated in a very different way, depending on the conditions existing on the ground: the presence or not of previous local leaderships; the existence or not of organizational political experiences of the community before the Bolivarian process; as well as of the political conceptions of the officials and militants of the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) responsible for the relations between the institutions of the state and these organizations. The fact is that there has been an extraordinary dependence on the transfer of resources from the state. There was no possibility of autonomy for the majority of popular grassroots organizations because they did not have their own productive capacity.

When, with the current economic crisis that begins in 2014, transfers of resources to these popular organizations were reduced, they tended to weaken and many of them entered into crisis. Another factor of this weakening has been the creation of the Local Supply and Production Committees (CLAP) as a mechanism for the distribution of highly subsidized basic foods to the popular sectors. In practice, these have become clientelist organizational modalities dedicated exclusively to the distribution of food and lacking autonomy, that tend to replace the Communal Councils.

Latin American solidarity and cooperation policies have also been highly dependent on oil revenues. To carry out international policies such as the subsidized oil delivery programs to Central American and Caribbean countries, financial support to Bolivia and Nicaragua, and other diverse initiatives that the Venezuelan government took on the Latin American terrain, it was necessary to guarantee short and medium term an increase in oil revenues. When Chávez died in 2013, oil represented 96 percent of the total value of exports, making the country's dependence on oil

higher than ever before.

In Venezuelan oil history, the first decade of the century was the time at which the best possible conditions were given to debate, reflect and begin to experiment in other practices and other possible futures for Venezuelan society beyond oil. A privileged moment to address the challenges of the transition to a post-oil society. It was a juncture in which Chávez had extraordinary leadership and legitimacy. He had the capacity to give a sense of direction to Venezuelan society and, with oil prices that reached up to 140 dollars per barrel, there were resources to respond to the needs of the population and begin the initial steps of a transition beyond of the oil. The opposite happened. In those years, the intoxication in abundance was repeated, the imagining of a Saudi Venezuela that had occurred at the time of the first government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in the 1970s. No one in Venezuela thought that it was possible for a decree to close all the oil wells from one day to the next. But the government policies were far from taking steps, albeit timid and initial, to overcome the dependence on oil, what they did was to deepen that dependence. In conditions of overabundance of foreign currency and in order to try to stop the flight of capital, an absolutely unsustainable controlled exchange rate parity was established. In this way, the so-called Dutch disease was accentuated, which contributed to the dismantling of the productive capacity of the country.

The distribution policies and the political initiatives of the state managed to improve the living conditions of the population and encouraged the strengthening of the social fabric, with broad experiences of popular participation. However, this was not accompanied by a project to transform the productive structure of the country. This marked the limits of the Bolivarian process as a project for the transformation of Venezuelan society. This means that the broad-based organizational processes that have involved millions of people were based on redistribution and not on the creation of new productive processes.

Now, following Garcia Linera again (because sometimes he summarizes more intelligently what other opinion leaders, followers and what I call intellectuals of the palace try to say and write in this line of argument): according to him, this tension between state and self-organization, between government and movements, between vindication of good living and extractivism in the short term are normal and creative tensions of a long process of revolutionary transformation in Latin America. For him, the critics of the radical left towards the progressive processes do not understand that they are necessary tensions and, supposedly, they want to proclaim socialism by decree.

ML: One problem is that the progressive governments, insofar as their members came from processes of social movements and protest with a left political identity, have assumed a kind of vanguard identity. As if they already knew what people need. In this way, spaces for real dialogue, where diverse people can effectively propose, have been lost. And political participation has become a kind of acclamation of the executive project. That is precisely where it is impoverished. There are many examples in European history that make me think that this is an inevitable dynamic, which we tend to underestimate a lot. The left that manages state apparatuses finally is immersed in powerful dynamics of these apparatuses and they are transformed as people, through the new spaces in which they move, because the logics of the position offer them other experiences and begin to mould their political horizons and their culture too. Their subjectivity is transformed, they incorporate the exercise of power. And then, if there is no corrective action on the part of a strong organized society, which can claim them, that can correct, protest, and also criticize, this must necessarily divert the project.

On the other hand, it is not so much a matter of criticizing the times in which things are changed - because in that I agree, deep transformations need a lot of time, they need a cultural change and can even take generations. It is about looking at the direction that a political project of transformation takes - that is, whether it is going in the right direction or not, at whatever rate. And there I believe that the question of deepening extractivism simply cancels other possibilities for future transformation. If we are closing certain future options that were important to us by more short-term calculations, or also because of difficulties that arise at the moment, we cannot say that it is a question of temporality; it is a question of direction. You can market or de-commodify, but if you say first I will commercialize

everything and then de-commodify, I do not think there is much logic; if you say: I am decommodifying but it will take more time, however, you can see that I am taking steps in the indicated direction, it would be fine. So, I think there is a fundamental difference in the reading of processes.

EL: In the critical debates on extractivism one of the issues that I believe is fundamental is: what do we understand by extractivism? If we think of extractivism only as an economic model, or as Alvaro Garc a Linera says as "a technical relationship with nature" compatible with any model of society, one could conclude that it is necessary to deepen extractivism not only to respond to social demands, but also in order to accumulate the necessary resources to invest in alternative productive activities that allow extractivism to be overcome. But if one understands extractivism in broader terms, if one understands that extractivism is a form of relationship between human beings and nature; which is part of a pattern of accumulation of global capital; which is a specific form of insertion in the world capitalist system and in the international division of labour and nature; if it is understood that extractivism generates and reproduces certain institutionalities, state models, behavioural patterns of its bureaucracy; if it is understood that extractivism generates social subjects and subjectivities; that builds culture, necessarily leads to other conclusions.

Just look at the one hundred years of extractivism in Venezuela. We have deeply installed a culture of a rich country, a country of abundance. Since we have the largest oil reserves on the planet, we expect that the state satisfies not only all our needs, but also our consumption aspirations. We imagine that a society with rights is possible, but without responsibilities. We think oil should be free. These cultural patterns, once firmly rooted in the collective imagination, constitute a severe obstacle to the possibility of a transformation not only to overcome capitalism but also to face the civilizational crisis that humanity is experiencing today. These imaginaries of ever-increasing material wealth serve as support for economist/consumerist conceptions of life that leave out a wide range of the fundamental issues that we would have to confront today. This blocks the possibility of recognizing that the decisions that are being taken today have long-term consequences in a completely divergent sense of what the official discourse proclaims as a future horizon for Venezuelan society.

From this imaginary El Dorado, a land of infinite abundance, it is assumed as necessary, for example, that there is large-scale mining exploitation in the so-called Orinoco Mining Arc. Through a presidential decree, Nicol s Maduro at the beginning of 2016, decided to open 112 thousand square kilometres, a territory the size of Cuba, 12 percent of the national territory, to large transnational mining companies. It is an area that is part of the Amazon rainforest (with the importance this has in the regulation of global climate systems); an area inhabited by different indigenous peoples whose territories should have been demarcated according to the Constitution of 1999 and whose culture, including their lives, are today severely threatened; a territory where a good part of the basins of the main rivers of the country are located; the main sources of water; a territory of extraordinary biological diversity; a territory where there are hydroelectric dams that produce 70 percent of the electricity consumed in the country. All this is threatened in an opening that has begun with the call to 150 transnational companies. It is conceived as a special economic zone where fundamental aspects of the Constitution and the laws of the Republic, such as the rights of indigenous peoples and environmental and labour legislation do not have to be fulfilled. This in order to create the most favourable conditions possible to attract foreign investment. They are thus taking decisions that are outlining a national project that may have consequences for the next 100 years.

Another essential issue, according to my understanding, for the discussion is the geopolitical problematic, and in this case the advances in the level of regional integration connected to the evaluation of the new strategies of imperialism and its interference in the continent. Critics of the left often say you disparage and do not correctly measure the impact of the interference or destabilization of the United States, essentially focusing on an internal criticism of the processes and governments. This is what the Argentine sociologist Atilio Bor n affirms, among others: several of his texts insist on the fact that it is necessary to understand that no matter how moderate the progressive governments, they opened a new wave of integration without the USA and that this would represent a gigantic step in regional history with a Bolivarian perspective. So,

what do we think of the state of Latin American integration, what are the advances and limits at this level today?

ML: Ten years ago, there were really interesting and hopeful proposals and impulses at the global level from Latin America, in the sense that regional integration was considered in a different direction than that of the European Union with its neoliberal constitution, especially in terms of what was the Bank of the South that was going to promote projects of sovereignty and sustainability and not of development in classic terms, or with the SUCRE project. Unfortunately, these initiatives have not been successful over the past 10 years, especially because of the resistance of Brazil, which obviously has an important role in the region and which was more oriented towards its fellow BRICS countries and prioritized its interests as a world power.

E.L: In the end, Brazil agreed with the Bank of the South provided it was another development bank...

If we now see the case of the deep Venezuelan crisis, which has polarized intellectuals (as well as Venezuelan society obviously), we have witnessed the translation of this polarization around two international appeals. First the appeal that was made (with the active participation of Edgardo) from Venezuela, “Urgent international call to stop the escalation of violence in Venezuela. Looking at Venezuela, beyond polarization” that you signed and, secondly, the response entitled “Who will accuse the accusers?”, given by the members of the “Network of Intellectuals and Artists in Defence of Humanity” (REDH), which is a rather hostile response. [1] One of the central arguments of the members of the REDH is to affirm that the crisis of Venezuela is first and foremost the product of an imperialist aggression and an insurrection of the neoliberal right as well as an “economic war”. They insist that we are in a regional context of the return of the right, after the coup in Brazil, and that this forces the left to close ranks behind the governments that face this aggression, leaving aside “secondary contradictions”. On the contrary, the call signed by the two of you says: “We do not believe, as certain sectors of the Latin American left affirm, that today we are trying to defend a popular anti-imperialist government. This unconditional support of certain activists and intellectuals not only reveals an ideological blindness, but it is harmful since it contributes unfortunately to the consolidation of an authoritarian regime”.

ML: A colleague recently told me that geopolitical perspectives make the interests and voices of the people invisible. And I do not know if that is a secondary contradiction. It seems to me very deplorable the way in which this confrontation has taken place, because it closed spaces of reflection instead of opening them. I think that what we need at this moment is just a deeper reflection, spaces of debate and not of closure, in order to find a solution to the Venezuelan crisis. And I have the feeling that the further away people are from the Venezuelan process, the more they need to affirm a kind of solidary identity, which is rather a sort of rather abstract anti-imperialist reflex, detached from what happens on a day-to-day basis in Venezuela. I believe that the solidarities that we need to build are different. They should not revolve around ourselves, our needs to affirm a political identity such as a profession of faith, but rather be a search for paths together, between concrete peoples. Solidarity should be with the actually existing people, who often do not have the same interests as a government.

And this leads me to a self-criticism: Recently I returned to Venezuela and had the opportunity to talk with some sectors of critical Chavismo, and it was only at this moment that I understood how this field has been transformed in recent years. And how complicated it is to show solidarity, even in a critical and differentiated way, in the hyperpolarized scenario that exists today. The letter that I signed should have been thought about more, discussed more before circulating it, and I myself had to take more time to talk with the different sectors of critical Chavismo before signing; just to be consistent with my own approach. Although I still think that it is necessary to defend democratic institutions and certain liberal values, as the letter does, we must expand and deepen them but at the same time defend them, as results of past struggles. And above all, I think that an external aggression can never justify the mistakes that are made inside.

This polarization that has occurred in Venezuela and other countries as well, which does not allow grey shades beyond black and white, is very negative and very harmful to the transformation. It makes it very difficult to stand in solidarity without causing harm on one side or on the other. As a feminist, I also feel that the way in which this whole debate takes place is extremely patriarchal, full of simplifying binarisms, war logic and self-feeding egos, while what we should do is build ties and other ways of doing politics, that is, accompanying us on paths of search for alternatives.

Indeed, it seems that a certain dialectic of critical thinking has been lost in this debate. Regarding the polarization in Venezuela, the unconditional supporters of Maduro underline that the polarization is above all between the right wing allied to imperialism versus the “people” and the Bolivarian government. Such analysis is obviously based on concrete elements of the coordinates of the current conflict, but it does not leave space to understand the tensions, differentiations and contradictions internal to Chavismo and also within the popular field.

ML: There is a kind of artificial construction of a unity between government and people, as also happened a lot in relation to Cuba, for example. In other words, the Cuban people are one and the one who speaks for the Cuban people is necessarily their government. As if there were no relations of domination and conflicts of interest in Cuban society. Between men and women, but also between state and society, or between blacks, mestizos and whites, or between country and city. From this perspective that unites government and people in a single symbolic block, nothing emancipatory can really be born. Finally, what we want is to reduce or overcome those relations of domination if I understand the task well. In this dichotomous construction, of polarization, a logic of war is reactivated, which is a cultural legacy left by the Cold War, and which already in that historical moment allowed us to avoid many necessary lessons. A legacy that maybe was partially overcome by the revolt of '68 with its cultural impacts on societies but is suffering a re-enactment now that I feel is quite painful.

Edgardo, on the situation in Venezuela: personally, I did not sign any of the two international calls, because I really felt that none responded at the same time to the urgency of the situation, to the necessary denunciation of imperialist aggression, of the right and its openly pro-coup sectors, and at the same time to make a clear and critical analysis of the authoritarian drift of *Madurismo*, not only by the formal defence of the 1999 Constitution but also by the necessary recuperation of the forms of popular power, of the experiences of self-organisation, of the communal project which survives, despite everything, in the interstices of the process.

EL: Obviously, there has been a sustained offensive on the part of the Empire, by the United States. Since the beginning of the Chávez government there have been attempts by the United States government to undermine this process, both for geopolitical and economic reasons. We know that Venezuela's oil reserves, such as gold, coltan, uranium and other abundant mineral reserves in the south of the country are essential for the United States, either for itself or to limit the access to them. of its global rivals. Since 1999, Venezuela represented a point of entry for changes in the continent, and that is why the US also supported the 2002 military coup and the 2002-2003 business lock-out oil strike that paralyzed the country for two months, with the express intention of overthrowing the government of President Chávez. We know that groups and parties of the Venezuelan far right have counted on permanent advice and funding from the State Department. The financial blockade and the explicit threats of armed intervention formulated by Trump cannot in any way be taken lightly. There have also been important interventions by *Uribismo* and Colombian paramilitarism. This type of aggression is part of the panorama of the current crisis in Venezuela, and no one from the left can avoid it or put it in the background.

Now the problem of the Bolivarian process is: What do we want to defend? and How should we defend it? Do we have to defend any government to have a discourse faced with the US? Or do we have to defend a collective process of a democratic, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist nature that points to a horizon that responds to the profound civilizational crisis we are going through? Do we have to defend the increasingly authoritarian government of Maduro, or do we have to defend the transformative potential that emerged in 1999? Today, for the preservation of

power for the Maduro government, clientelism and the threats of cutting off access to subsidized basic goods play a much more important role (in conditions in which for a high proportion of the population this is the only way to have access to food), than the appeal to popular participation. And there, in the background, a theme of the debate is what do we understand today by the left? Can we think of the left without questioning what the socialism of the last century has been? When forces that sought to overcome bourgeois democracy ended up being authoritarian, vertical, totalitarian regimes ... Today, in Venezuela, we have to ask ourselves if we are moving in the direction of deepening democracy or if the doors are closing to direct participation of the people in the orientation of the destination of the country.

In Venezuela, in 1999 a Constituent Assembly (CA) was held with very high levels of participation, a referendum was organized to decide whether a CA was to be held, the deputies were elected with high participation, the results were approved with a majority of 62% of the votes, enormous resources were spent to modernize the electoral regime, establishing a totally digitized, transparent system with multiple control mechanisms, and an audit. A reliable electoral system, virtually proof from fraud as has been recognized by numerous international organizations and electoral experts around the world. But, in December 2015, the opposition wins the parliamentary elections with a large majority, and the government is faced with the dilemma of respecting these electoral results and remaining faithful to the constitution of 1999, or on the contrary, doing everything possible to remain in power, even if this meant ignoring the will of the majority of the population or sacrificing the electoral system that had conquered such high levels of legitimacy. It has clearly opted to remain in power at all costs.

Step by step decisions are being made that define an authoritarian drift. The holding of the recall referendum in 2016 was impeded, the elections of governors in December of the same year were unconstitutionally postponed, the attributions of the National Assembly are unknown, and these are usurped between the Supreme Court of Justice and the executive power. As of February 2016, the President began to govern by way of a state of emergency ("economic emergency"), expressly violating the conditions and time limits established in the Constitution of 1999. Assuming powers that according to the Constitution correspond to the sovereign people, Maduro called a National Constituent Assembly and electoral mechanisms were defined to guarantee total control of that assembly. A monocoloured National Constituent Assembly was elected, its 545 members are identified with the government. This assembly, once installed, proclaimed itself supra-constitutional and plenipotentiary. Most of its decisions are adopted by acclamation or unanimously without any debate. Instead of addressing the task for which it was supposedly chosen, the drafting of a new draft Constitution, it begins to make decisions referring to all areas of public powers, dismisses officials, calls elections in conditions designed to prevent or make very difficult the participation of those who do not support the government, approves what it calls constitutional laws, which in fact produces the abolition of the 1999 Constitution. They adopt retroactive laws, such as the decision to outlaw those parties that did not participate in the mayoral elections of December 2017. The participation of left-wing candidates different from those decided by the PSUV leadership is impeded. Meanwhile, the National Electoral Council carries out a fraud to block the election of Andrés Velázquez as governor of Bolívar State ...

What is at stake here is not the formal defence of the Constitution of 1999, but the defence of democracy, not a formal bourgeois democracy, but the opening towards the deepening of democracy that represented the 1999 Constitution. That there has been a unique milestone that defines a rupture of the democratic constitutional order created in 1999, like a salami, that democratic constitutional order has been sliced step by step, successively, until we find ourselves in the current situation in which this is no longer recognizable.

So, after this very complex panorama where *progresismo* experiences brusque or gradual setbacks, where the critical or radical lefts do not manage to emerge as a massive popular force, where the actually existing alternative electoral forces are, at the moment, right-wing neoliberals, even insurrectional in some cases like Venezuela, how to think concrete alternatives in this end of hegemony of the progresismos and return of a late neoliberalism? From the perspective of good living and ecosocialism, from criticism of the limits and contradictions of progressive governments, from popular or decolonial feminism, how to think about utopias with concrete perspectives for Our

America?

EL: In Venezuela, the only source of optimism for me at this moment is the fact that the crisis has been so deep and has impacted the collective consciousness in such a way that it is possible that the charm of oil, of rentism and of the magical state as provider and benefactor begins, slowly, to dissipate. The entire left-right political debate in recent decades has operated within the parameters of the oil imagination, within this notion of Venezuela as a rich country, owner of the largest oil reserves on the planet. The policy has revolved around the demands that different sectors of society make to the state to access these resources. I begin to see signs, still lamentably weak, of an acknowledgment that it is not possible to continue on that path. We begin to assume that a historical cycle comes to an end. People start scratching their heads, and now what? I have had relationships for years with what is the most continuous and most vigorous process of popular organization in Venezuela, Cecosesola. This is a network of cooperatives operating in several states in the centre and west of the country that links a wide network of agricultural and artisanal producers with urban consumers, as well as a big cooperative health centre and a funeral cooperative. I have been struck by the presence of topics such as the recuperation and exchange of seeds in everyday conversations. The recognition of a before and after the beginning of the current crisis. Recently, when someone in a farming community came down from a nearby town, they told him to remember to bring me a can of tomato seed. That was the everyday. These were seeds of imported, selected and hybrid tomatoes that did not reproduce, not necessarily transgenic, but sterile after the first sowing. With the economic crisis, that access to seeds is abruptly cut off. Ancestral peasant practices are recuperated. Meetings between farmers begin in which the question is posed, who has seeds of what? Autochthonous seeds that were only preserved on a small scale begin to be exchanged, potato seeds, tomato seeds and so on. This opens up new possibilities. We are going to wake up from this dream (which turned out to be a nightmare) and think about the possibility that we are somewhere else, in another country, in other conditions and life goes on but now it is going in a new way.

Miriam, what Edgardo says is interesting but describes, for the moment, very small embryos of popular power, which may seem not very operational in the face of immense regional challenges, financial globalization, world chaos

ML: Of course, that is, it depends a bit from where you see things, I think that here, for example, in Europe, what we have to do is start to become aware of the effects that the consumer lifestyle causes in other parts of the world. It seems to me that the dimensions of the destruction that this causes, not only in environmental terms but also in terms of social fabric, of subjectivities, are much more important than what is presumed in Europe, where all this remains practically invisible, camouflaged by consumer environments which are pleasant and anesthetizing.

EL: Or the belief that the standard of living of the North does not depend on extractivism in the South.

ML: Some of us call this the imperial way of life, which automatically assumes that the natural resources and cheap or enslaved labour of the whole world are for the richest 20 percent of the world population that lives in the capitalist centres or the middle and upper classes of the peripheral societies. And if it's cheap, that's good. It gives the feeling that the planet is going to collapse ecologically and socially because of the enormous number of gadgets that are produced, that nobody really needs except "the markets", for everything that capitalism suggests as artificially constructed needs. So, here in the capitalist centres there is a very important task of reducing the amount of matter and energy that is spent. For example, the movements around de-growth have a good perspective in terms of cultural transformation, where because of the discomforts with neoliberalism that you mentioned earlier, people rediscover other non-material dimensions of quality of life, and also the wealth of self-production clothes, or honey, or other things.

Yes, here in France too, there are currently a lot of alternative rural networks, self-managed collective experiences, areas to defend (ZAD), alternative currencies, and so on but they are still very small.

ML: Of course, they are small networks for now, however the important thing is to infect more people with these different imaginaries, so that the change is made not by force, or not by the crisis, but by desire itself. That people can feel, experience in their own flesh that there are other dimensions of good life that can easily compensate for having less materially, and that a decrease does not have to be experienced as loss.

EL: Not as a sacrifice to stop having things ...

In fact, here, there is more and more talk about the necessary conquest of a happy sobriety and voluntary austerity against consumer waste, it is an interesting, powerful concept that can be connected to good living and ecosocialism.

ML: I feel every time I go to Europe that there is a lot of discomfort with this super-accelerated lifestyle that prevails here, I have many friends who are sick, if not physically psychologically, with stress, depression, burnouts, panic attacks. The dimensions that this acquires are hidden quite systematically in the dominant discourses that continue to associate wellbeing with economic growth, and much more so in what is perceived from the global South. Seen from Latin America, here in the countries of the centre, everything is necessarily a wonder. Then, to visualize these discomforts and make visible the other forms of life that already result from them, would be an important step. Because in the South, curiously everyone believes that it is better to live in the city, while in Germany or Spain, on the contrary, the ecological communities that go to the countryside are multiplying. In other words, it would be a step to help break this hegemony of imitative development, which forces the South to repeat all the mistakes that have already been made in Northern societies, such as clogging cities with cars, for example. But here in the North some of these errors are being overcome by the new generations, as in the division of labour between men and women. Now, in the generations from mine down, sharing the tasks of care not only in the couple but beyond the couple, perhaps in the building, in the community that can be generated in a reduced space of coexistence, has become more normal.

This is also another important element, building community against forced individualization, both in the countryside and in the city. I do not mean the community understood as the small peasant village, ancestral, fixed in time, but political communities in movement, which incorporate their tasks of care as collective tasks and then reorganize life around what life reproduces, and not around what the market or capital demands. And I think we should make visible all the efforts that are already being made in this sense, where people live relatively well, both in the North and in the South. In the South, in part, they will be ancestral communities, but there are also new ones, while in the North they are usually newly constituted. It's about changing the domination of one way of thinking and looking at the things that exist, you do not have to invent everything from scratch.

For example, there is a view that urban suburbs are hell, in the global South above all. But if you are going to look closer, there are many logics there that are absolutely anti-capitalist, that of not working, that of giving priority to partying, that of exchanges not mediated by the logic of money ... Maybe it's not the model, anyway there is no model and there should not be, that is very important to emphasize. We are not going to have, after twentieth century socialism, a new unique recipe which we will all sign up to and follow, but rather to allow that diversity of alternatives, so that we can build from each culture and context, from the people who are involved in them. Good living is plural.

We also have to generate a culture of alternatives that allows us to err, to make mistakes, to learn from mistakes. These spaces of social experimentation where we say, good, we are going to try that, it does not work, we are going to try something else, but in cohesion and without competing, according to the principle of cooperation and not competition. A book called "The future of development" affirms that the percentage of the world population really inserted in the circuits of the neoliberal globalized market is barely half, and that the rest is still in what we would call the margins. [2] That gives hope, it also means that half the world population is in something else, beyond the dominant model, so we should start looking around.

Very good, thank you very much.

[1] Revoltura [“Urgent International Call To Stop The Escalation of Violence in Venezuela”](#) and Venezuelaanalysis.com [“Who Will Accuse the Accusers? Statement in Defense of Venezuela”](#).

[2] Gustavo Esteva, Salvatore Babones, and Philipp Babcicky, *The Future of Development: A Radical Manifesto*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2013.