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NEGOTIATING THE LOCAL: THE LATIN AMERICAN “PINK TIDE” OR WHAT’S LEFT FOR THE LEFT?

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Abstract. The results of recent electoral processes in Latin America reflect a political shift toward the left. This article analyzes the transformations that, within the context of the disappearance of socialism in Eastern Europe and the consolidation of globalization, experience this new left which differentiates itself from the left associated with the national liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s. In the present scenario, the paradigms of the State, the Nation, and the National, now considered obsolete by postmodernist theories, acquire new meanings that reconceptualize the State as a negotiation space and the Nation as a place where one seeks a global insertion as much as a regional integration. From this perspective, local negotiations result in a key component in articulating the transnational dynamics and elements of Latin America.

Resumen. Los resultados de recientes procesos electorales en América Latina dan cuenta de un viraje político hacia la izquierda. En este artículo se analizan las transformaciones que, en el contexto de desaparición del socialismo en Europa Oriental y consolidación de la globalización, experimenta esta nueva izquierda, diferenciándose de la izquierda asociada a los movimientos de liberación nacional de los 1970s y 1980s. En el escenario actual, los paradigmas del Estado, la Nación y lo Nacional, considerados obsoletos por teorías postmodernas, adquieren nuevas significaciones, reconceptualizándose el Estado como espacio de negociación y la Nación como lugar desde donde se busca tanto la inserción global como la integración regional. Desde esta perspectiva, *la negociación de lo local* resulta un elemento clave para la articulación de las dinámicas transnacionales y los elementos regionales en Latinoamérica.

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At the beginning of the 21st century, we are confronting in Latin America what would have been considered, a few years ago, an improbable scenario: a series of political transformations that have been characterized by the media, in some cases, as *Latin America's turn to the left* and in other cases, more cautiously, as the *Latin American "pink tide."*¹ This expression is indicative of the moderate and even hybrid nature of some of the political processes that are currently taking place in the region. In the Southern Cone the political scenario follows the social and political recovery of countries that were dismantled by dictatorships during the 1970s and part of the 1980s, which destroyed what was left of the welfare state. Cultural institutions, economic structures, and political parties collapsed in the region, leaving civil societies under the shadow of debilitated states, dominated by external debt and by the predatory strategies of neoliberalism. Under these circumstances, the left has become, for many, the most propitious device to capitalize on collective disenchantment and to offer at least the illusion of a political alternative not completely lacking in utopian undertones. Even for the more skeptical observers, the return of the left would at least demonstrate its ability for internal restructuring, for social recovery, and for ideological adjustment to the political and economical challenges of a new era.

Nevertheless, we should start by accepting two facts: first, that the different political regimes currently in power in Latin America cannot be considered under just one label, given the unique ideological characteristics and the specific social constituencies each of these political movements mobilize and incorporate. Second, I believe we should accept the fact that even in the cases where we can still speak of leftist movements, this designation applies today to political experiences that have little resemblance to what we used to identify under that name. Nowadays, the Left, obviously marked by the ideological impact of past struggles and undeniable failures, is also affected by the disappearance of what we used to call "real socialism" in Eastern Europe, and by the consolidation of neoliberalism and globalization at a planetary level under the renovated hegemony of the United States. At the same time, the processes of institutionalization that the Left has gone through in order to achieve power by democratic means have also contributed to the domestication of its ethos. Without a doubt, current political experiences in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil,

Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay notoriously detour from the paradigms established by the emancipatory movements (movements of national liberation) that followed the Cuban Revolution. Very few elements in the ideology or the administration of the regimes that are nowadays called leftist movements evoke, in fact, the “hard” content we used to attach to the concept in the 20th century.

In Uruguay (ending a period of 170 years under the control of traditional parties) and also in the *concertación* (socialist coalition) in Chile, the acquisition of power by Tabaré Vázquez (2005) and Michelle Bachelet (2006), respectively, is the result of programmatic alliances based on political and ideological compromises as well as the product of a long process of accumulation of political credibility by progressive political sectors during the last few decades. In Argentina, the manoeuvres for economic recovery and reconnection of civil society have been implemented from a platform that articulates, in varying proportions, degrees of populism and neoliberalism. In Brazil, the largest leftist party in Latin America—and probably in the world—came into power in 2003, only to initiate, right after its electoral triumph, what has been characterized as “its melancholic descent.” None of these scenarios can be merged with the more radical political experiences represented by Venezuelan *chavismo* (since 1999) or by the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia (2005) and Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2006). Ollanta Humala, in Perú, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in Mexico, who participated in the presidential elections of 2006, constituted other potential but aborted variations from the pink tide model we have been referring to so far.²

Without minimizing the substantial differences between the political experiences mentioned above, what follows is a brief account of a series of features that could contribute to illustrate the transformation of the political paradigms I alluded to before, and the impact that these changes are having on collective imaginaries in the region, which also translate at the level of symbolic representation.

In general terms, if we compare current political experiences with Latin American scenarios of the 1970s, 1980s, and part of the 1990s, some of the most obvious political differences are:

- Substitution of institutional—electoral—means to reach power for armed struggles.

- Substitution of the rhetoric of social justice for the discourse of class struggle.
- Considerable opposition to privatization but, at the same time, adoption of conciliatory attitudes toward a market economy, and general acceptance of the conditions necessary for economic integration, both regionally and globally.
- Revitalization of the principle of national sovereignty and attempts, within that framework, to strengthen the role of the State as an agent of social transformation. Cautious and selective opposition to transnational corporations and to national policies designed to protect foreign investment.
- Adherence to non-intervention principles and regional solidarity (announcement, in some cases, of intentions to re-establish relations with Cuba).
- As a result of these positions, deepening of North/South antagonisms in terms that might trigger, according to some, an ideological offensiveness from the United States, similar to those utilized by the USA during the Cold War.
- Reinforcement of attention to problems of social inequality as substitution for the (liberal) multiculturalist consideration of cultural difference.
- Emphasis on ethics as the fundamental—and even foundational—element of the political.
- Attention to the structure of feelings—to use Raymond Williams' (1963) expression— that underlies social experience and mobilizes collective imaginaries. Replacement—except in the case of Venezuela—of epic narratives that characterized the last three decades of the 20th century by discursive positions in which the political is articulated through the notions of myth (*mito bolivariano*, for instance), desire, passion, affectivity, tradition, and so on as a recognition that social transformation necessarily implies the reconfiguration of collective subjectivities.

Another element that I consider interesting and meaningful in the political experiences of what we could call the “institutionalized left” in Latin America is the fact that these experiences cannot be understood except as the counterpart of social movements that exist outside the limits of traditional politics, although in some cases also become part of the state management apparatus. In the last few

decades, the human rights movements in the Southern Cone, the *Sem Terra* movement in Brazil, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, the *cocalero* movement and the multiple indigenous mobilizations in the Andes have created new conditions for a reconfiguration of the political. The experience and effects of these movements substantially alter traditional protocols, particularly those related to popular interpellation and to the relations between popular sectors and State institutions. If at some point the question was whether social movements would be able to translate defensive action into offensive strategies, transforming social demands into political programs, and whether the multiple agendas of different social sectors could be articulated in an organic, unified way, recent political experiences in Latin America seem to give a positive response to those interrogations.³

From a cultural perspective, it could be said that important transformations appear on the horizon of Latin America's *collective imaginaries*. I will make reference to a series of conceptual transformations in order to connect these changes to the specific field of symbolic representations, and to the challenges these changes pose for aesthetic expressions.

1. First, I think that as a result of the transformation of the social and political scenario, we are confronted in Latin America with a new conceptualization of national-popular subjectivities—that is, of the qualities, expectations, and habitus of social agents. In other words, the connections between the social, the political, the ideological, and the cultural (as opposed to the traditional connections between society, politics, ideology, and culture) seem also to interweave in a different manner in the constitution of collective subjectivities that interact within the framework of what we might call—using a modern expression—the national culture. The reference to the social, the political, the ideological, and the cultural points to mobilizations that traverse the collective domain without being institutionalized, where the agents, the agendas, and the articulations between social sectors may be characterized as spontaneous, discontinuous, and fluctuating impulses acting from below.⁴ It is interesting to see how the processes that have led to the changes now taking place in Latin America at the social and political level have been represented, and at times announced, through the symbolic means of aesthetic representation.⁵

2. Second, it could be said that at least three undoubtedly modern paradigms like those of nation, State, and national identity, which have been considered—at least by some critics—almost obsolete in post-modern scenarios, seem to have been refurbished under the activation of ethnic or ideological particularisms that impact if not determine local politics. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that the centrifugal forces that affect national configurations today cannot be disregarded, and should be considered some of the most compelling problems to be analyzed by the social sciences. The tremendous impact of immigration, political exiles, economic and sexual diasporas, and, in general, the nomadic nature of our contemporary world cause a constant mobilization and relocation of individuals, ideas, and projects where the national is constantly re-signified and often acquires a relative, fluctuating cultural and ideological meaning. The effects of this dissemination—to use here Homi Bhabha's (1992) expression—traverse and impact in many ways national narratives, affecting social subjectivities and social interactions in multiple manners.

3. In connection with this, I want to mention the importance of new forms of internationalism. (We could think, for instance, of Evo Morales as being just the tip of the iceberg of indigenous movements that have been always active in the Andean region, of Hugo Chávez as the leader of transnational forms of populist activation that clearly surpass the boundaries of national politics in Venezuela; we could think about current scenarios in the Southern Cone not just in terms of national politics but as the result of the regional articulation around Merco Sur, and so on.) At the same time, it is obvious that problems such as drug trafficking in, let's say, the Andean region or the political and economic bankruptcies in the River Plate are unthinkable if we are not able to surmount the imposed parameters of the national, even if the daily battles as well as the sufferings derived from them are undoubtedly localized experiences.

Some time ago Eric Hobsbawm pointed out that, in his opinion, world history

can no longer be contained within the limits of nations or nation-states such as those that used to define politically, culturally, economically, or even linguistically. [World history] would see the “nation state” and the “nations,” or the

ethno linguistic groups, primarily stepping back, resisting and adapting themselves, being absorbed or dislodged by the new supra-national structure of the world. Nations and nationalisms will be present, but they will play a subordinate and frequently minor role in this history. (Hobsbawm 1992, 182)

In Latin America, the connection between national and transnational dynamics implies a continuous balancing act that has to do, to a great extent, with the postcolonial condition of Latin American societies. In many cases, the inter-national or trans-national perspective is indispensable for the understanding of particular social phenomena. For instance, the movements of national liberation, the dictatorships and the movements of popular resistance that opposed them for decades, and the politics of neoliberalism have taught us long ago the importance of paying attention to dynamics that exceed the limits of the nation-State. For this reason, some social analysts advocate for new forms of regional analysis; in some cases they speak of continentalism as an instance that would allow us to focus on a mediating category of analysis between the local and the international, or as a form, according to others, of post-nationalism that would allow us to reach, in a study of the national, dispersed and expatriated communities, transnational movements, and cross-cultural social and political agendas.

Within this context, the national must be rethought in two directions that only appear as opposed: first, the national is the inescapable platform of popular mobilizations and processes of social regrouping and political reorganization. Second, the national is the basis for a political projection from the local to the regional, to the national, to the transnational. But concurrent to the significance of the national level, internationalism nowadays constitutes a political feature that should be, in my opinion, revisited, re-analyzed, and re-theorized.

4. Another concept that is under transformation is that of the State. As the place from which “institutional order” is supposed to emerge, the liberal State is the space where popular demands are addressed and, in that sense, constitutes the internal frontier against which popular agents define their political action. But in the new scenarios (those dominated by leftist or populist positions), new conceptions of the State seem to be in the process of elaboration, since the State must

displace negativity toward an antagonistic location situated outside of itself.⁶ The State cannot continue to be considered, though, as the empty or the floating signifier commonly associated with the cancellation of traditional politics.⁷ On the contrary, this perception must be replaced by one in which the State is the space of negotiation and management (*gestión*); that is, it must be the objective of new strategies of social recognition. In other words, the state must be reinscribed in a new horizon of legitimate representativity as the new image of popular empowerment.

5. In connection with the changes in the concept of the State, the concept of nation itself must also be reconceptualized, to signify not only a well-defined political and administrative space but also a sovereign and well-connected unity, in relation to the processes of both globalization (*mundialización*) and regional integration. In other words, national states are not only places for political and ideological interpellation but also functions or platforms for the construction and administration of national identities destined to represent social agents in times of political and ideological change. In this sense, national identities might develop forms of collective agency aimed at transcending, with both projects and actions, the real and the imagined boundaries of the nation-State.

6. As for the concept of social identity, some critics have detected a switch from the idea of democratic subject (that conceived as a differential subject, who is the agent of concrete and particularist demands) to the idea of popular subject: a subject that is constructed by aggregation, through the series of demands that have not been absorbed by the democratic system, and allows for the creation of pluralistic, heterogeneous fronts able to act in a unified manner at least in particular instances of the social struggle.

One issue to reflect upon is whether these changes lead toward a homogenizing concept of national culture (a populist one, where national culture equals “the people”) or instead to the emergence of new fragmentations (elite versus subalterns, or elite versus working class, or *cultura criolla* versus indigenous cultures, etc.), thus returning to antagonistic formulas that complicate, sometimes in a productive manner, the search for social change.

7. To summarize some of the problems I have been referring to here, it could be said that current changes in Latin American politics

call for a reflection on the relations between localism and totality, in order to analyze the articulations that connect civil society and political society (*sociedad civil* and *sociedad política*), regional and global spaces, and national, international, and transnational scenarios. In this direction the local must be thought of neither as a wishful replica of global scenarios, nor as the site of fundamentalist contingencies, nor as a passive, subaltern reservoir of controlled opposition. In my opinion, the local should be thought of as a specific—differentiated and differential—arena, where particularisms are retained and conflict is neither denied nor eliminated from above, but elaborated in a creative, egalitarian, and productive manner.

8. At the same time, some models of the Latin American political culture that were present during the second part of the 20th century, such as that of political and intellectual heroism, are making their return. It will be interesting to see if State macropolitics will in fact replace the micropolitics of marginal sectors that, for many, has so far constituted one of the characteristics of postmodern politics.

9. Also at a cultural level, it will be interesting to see how representational strategies and even the function of intellectuals will modify in connection with populist agendas or leftist political programs. In other words, how can progressive positions advance in a political scenario dominated as much by local agendas as by the impulses of globalization and the impositions of neoliberalism?

In my opinion, while the national question is a key element for the study and interpretation of Latin American politics and culture, it is obvious that none of the concepts associated with it (national culture, national identity, territoriality, and the like) can be retained today as a mere perpetuation of modern categories. Here is where I speak of the negotiation of the local, trying to focus on the possible articulations between situated subjects and transnationalized dynamics, between particular demands and wide-ranging proposals, between contingent conditions of collective existence and broader projects of social, economic, and political organization. In Latin America, in my opinion, in addition to and beyond an analysis of the national from new political and theoretical perspectives, it is necessary to focus on regional terms in order to elaborate, from this standpoint, a category that can interrogate and challenge grand universalist narratives, the latest of which is that of globalization or *mundialización*. From this perspective, the

negotiation of locality implies, then, the articulation of national narratives at a transnational level, and the configuration of local agendas designed to challenge and to domesticate global designs.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, the political reports on Latin America elaborated by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), directed by Larry Birns. <<http://www.coha.org>>.
- 2 For some review of the changes in the Latin American political scenario in the last decades see, for instance, Ballvé and Prashad (2006).
- 3 In 2003 James Petras expressed that idea in the following terms:

The major questions facing the social movements is how to translate their defensive action into an offensive strategy, how to convert their social demands into a political program, how to unify the social movements into a political instrument. The mass social movements have been the most effective vehicle for expressing popular discontent and realizing reforms—in great contrast to the ineffective and opportunist “left” electoral parties. However, the social movements have not created their own political instruments—with the notable exception of the Bolivian *cocaleros*—MAS (Movement to Socialism)... The social movements face a contradiction between mass independent direct action and links to bourgeois electoral parties. This contradiction can be resolved not by turning away from politics but by building a mass political instrument controlled and directed by and subordinated to the social movements. (3)
- 4 On this point see, for instance, Ardití (1987).
- 5 For example, the gradual disappearance of testimonial literatures in which the voice of the victims was pre-eminent during the 1970s, 1980s, and part of the 1990s, and the continuity and revitalization of urban chronicles where more anonymous characters move within the landscapes of Latin America’s peripheral and dependent modernities. But it is not the gaze of the modern *flâneur* that revives the harmony of the city, but a more ironic and skeptic perspective that illuminates, in the works of Carlos Monsiváis, Pedro Lemebel, Paolo Lihns and others, the topics of violence, representing also the subcultures that articulate, in paradoxical and sometimes perverse manners, consumption, crime, and marginalization (as can be seen in Jorge Franco’s narrative). In other cases, local circumstances become intricately connected with transnationalized social agendas, such as in the portrayal of Colombian society by Fernando Vallejo, where narco-traffic, homosexuality, and corruption create a saturated exposé of the contradictions and limits of modernity.

- 6 On this point, see Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2006) on populism and the return of the political.
- 7 Ernesto Laclau indicates the difference between “empty” and “floating” signifiers but recognizes that their meaning and practical manifestations often overlap.

[T]he categories of empty and floating signifiers are structurally different. The first concerns the construction of a popular identity once the presence of a stable frontier is taken for granted; the second tries conceptually to apprehend the logic of the displacements of that frontier. In practice, however, the distance between the two is not great. Both are hegemonic operations and, most importantly, the referents largely overlap. (1995, 133)

Laclau refers to “floating signifiers” to speak of “signifiers whose meaning is ‘suspended’ ” (132) because they have been articulated to a political/ideological link different from the one traditionally associated with them. In any case, I use the expression here loosely, to refer to a structure/institution that is in the process of re-signification, while still functioning with its assigned roles/meaning at both the political and ideological levels.

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