

Latin America Goes Global

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“Latin America in the New Global Capitalism,” by William I. Robinson, from NACLA: Report on the Americas 45, No. 2 (Summer 2012): 3-18.

In a recent article, William Robinson, a University of California professor, assesses the transition in Latin America from an economy with a national focus to one with a global orientation. The old oligarchies have been largely by-passed by transnational elites. The latter have facilitated corporate access to abundant resources and land. Since the 1980s, these elites have penetrated agribusiness (“endless seas of soy plantations”), manufacturing, tourism and extractive industries. Extractive activity, especially mining and energy (hydroelectric plants and dams) have increased dramatically in order to feed the global economy.

Ironically, the growth of extractive industries has largely occurred in left-leaning countries like Bolivia and Ecuador. In a disturbing conflict of interest, the governments of both countries are using income from mining and energy to fund special programs for the poor.

Growing wealth has been created by capitalist globalization but alongside this there is growing poverty and inequality. However, the neo-liberal model of “neo-developmentalism” based on integration into the global economy, has recently shown signs of exhaustion. These signs

include the mass grass roots struggles that Raúl Zibechi discusses in the summer, 2012, issue of NACLA.

Popular Protest

“Latin America: A New Cycle for Social Struggles,” by Raúl Zibechi, NACLA, Report on the Americas, 45, No. 2 (Summer 2012): 37-40 and 49.

Uruguayan writer and activist, Raúl Zibechi, describes the strong popular protests on the continent in the first three months of 2012, especially in Peru, Chile and Ecuador. These protests usually began as local movements, then they became regional and national in scope, capable of challenging governments. The focus is on the environment: open-pit mining; dams and hydroelectric plants; and oil wells. All have adverse effects on the health of the population.

In Peru, by 2012, several mining projects in the North that had contaminated the water supply had been blocked. In February 2012, popular sentiment in the northern region of Cajamarca boiled over. A protest against a new mining project was the trigger for wider grassroots mobilization. Organized by peasant communities, a March for the Right to Water headed toward the capital city of Lima. There it was joined by various political groups. According to a veteran peasant leader, the march was the “most important popular demonstration since the period of Fujimori.”

In the same month as the Peruvian protest, a popular uprising occurred in southern Chile. Its demands included an end to the hydro-Aysén dam project. The project involved the creation of five hydroelectric plants. As

soon as the project got government approval, large demonstrations took place throughout the country.

In February, 2012, there was another wave of protests that succeeded in shutting the region down. Bridges and highways were blockaded; docks, ports, airfields and airports were occupied. The protest was organized by the Social Movement for the Aysén region. The Social Movement is a large umbrella group for all social organizations in the South, including environmentalists, unions and even conservative groups. When repression failed to subdue the population, a dialogue was initiated by the government.

In March of 2012, protest erupted in Ecuador. The primary targets were mining activity, which threatened to devastate the areas of the indigenous people and the government which encouraged it. A People's March for Water, Land and Dignity involved marchers from three regions of Ecuador. The three columns converged on the capital, Quito. Organizing the march was the group, the Confederation of the Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) that put President Correa in power.

Zibechi has in previous writings sided with the grassroots as the most important agent of change. Consonant with this view, he concludes by saying that “a step even more important than fighting to change governments needs to be taken: “to create a different model of life that respects nature and people . . . It is necessary to ‘occupy’ the progressive governments of Latin America so that they don’t deviate from the objectives for which they were elected. But above all, it is urgent that we begin to occupy the hearts and minds of the population.”

Radical Democracy in Latin America

“Distinguishing Features of Latin America’s New Left in Power: The Chávez, Morales and Correa Governments,” by Steve Ellner, Latin American Perspectives, No. 1 (January 2012): 96-114.

Ellner is a professor of economics and history at the Universidad de Oriente in Venezuela. Departing from critics who equate radical democracy with authoritarian populism, thereby delegitimizing it, he elucidates what he sees as a hybrid model of democracy. The governments of Chávez, Morales and Correa fit this model. It links nationalist sentiments and radical goals.

Radical democracy is non-Marxist in its emphasis, not privileging a vanguard party or the working class, but marginalized groups like the urban poor, the indigenous and the peasants. This posture fits the concrete realities of Latin America today. (The model does not apply to center-left regimes like that of Brazil which don’t speak of “socialism for the 21st Century” and have traditional representative institutions and a less confrontational stance toward the U.S.) Radical democratic governments combine aspects of liberal democracy, namely representative institutions, with features of direct democracy: popular mobilization on an ongoing basis and direct participation in governance. Instances of direct democracy are frequent elections, the use of referendums and recall elections, and an active role for social movements in political life. A strengthened executive branch partially eclipses the role of representative bodies; it also slights the checks and balances of the liberal model.

Over time, the governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador have become more radical: the state exerts more and more control over private

corporations. (Some leftists in each country think that change is too slow, given that capitalism still dominates.)

In sum, Ellner rejects the notion of liberal critics like Jorge Casteñada and others that radical governments are populist and therefore demagogic and anti-democratic. Radical democracy is just a different model of democracy than its liberal or social democratic forms.