

TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES IN LATIN AMERICA

WILLIAM I. ROBINSON

Latin America has been the cutting edge of struggles worldwide against neoliberalism. Several alternatives to the dominant model of global capitalism appear to be emerging in the region. A new model of revolutionary struggle and popular transformation from below for the 21st century may be emerging, based on the Venezuelan experience, but more broadly, on mass popular struggles in Ecuador, Bolivia, and elsewhere. Yet global capital has been able to blunt some of these struggles from above and a reformist bloc allied with global capital seems to be competing to shape a post-neoliberal era. Neoliberalism, we should recall, is but one model of global capitalism; resistance to this model is not necessarily resistance to global capitalism. Behind the so-called ‘pink tide’ that has swept the region are competing configurations of social and class forces, ideologies, programs and policies. The crossroad that Latin America has reached is not about ‘reform versus revolution’ as much as it is about what social and political forces will achieve hegemony over the anti-neoliberal struggle and what kind of project will replace the orthodox programs that have ravaged the region over the past 25 years.

As long as neoliberalism reigned supreme and the neoliberal states remained impenetrable fortresses the refusal to deal with state power appeared reasonable. The neoliberal national state is not a space for engaging in politics; it is an apparatus for the technocratic administration of transnational capital accumulation, infrastructure, and social control. But what is the historical context here? The dominant groups in Latin America reconstituted and consolidated their control over *political society* in the 1980s and 1990s, but the new round of popular class mobilization in the 1990s and early 21st century pointed to their inability to sustain hegemony in *civil society*. The renewal of political activism by subordinate groups at the grassroots level has been outside of state structures and largely independent of organized left parties. Grassroots social movements flourished in civil society at a time

when the organized left operating in political society was unable to articulate a counter-hegemonic alternative. The failure of the left to lead a process of structural change from political society helped shift the locus of conflict more fully to civil society. Latin America seemed to move in the late 1980s and 1990s to a ‘war of position’ between contending social forces in light of subordinate groups’ previous failures to win a ‘war of manoeuvre’ through revolutionary upheaval and the limits to ‘power from above’. But as crises of legitimacy, perpetual instability, and the impending breakdown of state institutions spread rapidly throughout Latin America in the early 21st century, conditions seemed to be opening up for a new kind of war of manoeuvre under the novel circumstances of the global economy and society.

THE BACKDROP

The new transnational order has its origins in the world economic crisis of the 1970s, which gave capital the impetus and the means to initiate a major restructuring of the system through globalization over the next two decades.¹ Latin America has been deeply implicated in this restructuring crisis. The mass movements, revolutionary struggles, nationalist and populist projects of the 1960s and 1970s (all of which had their own internal contradictions) were beaten back by local and international elites in the latter decades of the 20th century in the face of the global economic downturn, debt, state repression, US intervention, the collapse of a socialist alternative, and the rise of the neoliberal model. This paved the way for the region’s integration into the new global capitalism.

This has entailed, first of all, the spread of *Maquiladoras* from the US-Mexico border south to much of Latin America, while small and medium industrial enterprises – known by their Spanish acronym PYMES – have reoriented from national to global markets by becoming local subcontractors for transnational corporations, while a few countries have integrated into global capitalism via substantial domestic industrial and financial sectors. Second, every country has been swept up in the explosive growth of the global tourist industry in Latin America, which now employs millions of people, accounts for a growing portion of national revenue and gross national product, penetrates numerous ‘traditional’ communities, and brings them into global capitalism. Third, amidst the commodity boom of this decade, a new type of transnational agribusiness has replaced the old agro-export and domestic agricultural models. Every national agricultural system is being inserted into the new global agro-industrial complex. In Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay, the biggest export crop now is soy, having replaced coffee, sugar, beef, and so on. Soy plantations set up by transnational agribusiness are dis-

placing millions of small-holders and eating up the rainforests. In Mexico and Central America corn and beans are being replaced by winter fruits and vegetables for the global supermarket. In Ecuador and Colombia it is flowers, in Chile, fruits and wines, and so on. Finally, the transnationalization of labour markets has made Latin America a major exporter of workers to the global economy. This immigrant Latin American labour, in turn, sends back remittances – some \$60 billion in 2006.² In many countries remittances are the number one source of foreign exchange.

In comparison to today, in the 1960s there were still major pockets of society that were pre-capitalist or that at least enjoyed some local autonomy vis-à-vis national and world capitalism. But 21st-century global capitalism has penetrated nearly every nook and cranny so that capitalist relations are practically universal in the region. This new cycle of capitalist development has been facilitated by the neoliberal adjustment programs required by transnationally mobile capital, which every Latin America country, with the exception of Cuba, implemented in the last two decades of the 20th century.

Neoliberalism, however, increasingly exhibits deep structural and social contradictions. In particular, the model is highly dependent on attracting mobile and often volatile transnational finance/investment capital, with a high component of financial speculation. Second, the new export boom, based on a set of non-traditional activities involved in regional participation in global production and distribution chains, is fragile as a consequence of global market competition, overproduction, and the impermanent nature of production sequences in the global economy – while also accelerating ecological disaster. Third, the development model based on neoliberal integration into the global economy does not require (or is at least unable to couple the new accumulation potential with) domestic market expansion or an inclusionary social base. Fourth, as a result, the social contradictions generated by neoliberalism have led to heightened conflict, popular class mobilization, and political instability.

The hegemony of neoliberalism began to crack in the late 1990s as a new resistance politics took hold. The fragile polyarchic ('democratic') systems installed through the so-called 'transitions to democracy' of the 1980s were increasingly unable to contain the social conflicts and political tensions generated by the polarizing and pauperizing effects of the neoliberal model.³ ECLAC data show that per-capita income declined by an average of 0.9 per cent every year in the 1980s, known as the 'lost decade' in Latin America, and then declined by an average of 1.5 per cent each year in the 1990s, the alleged 'decade of recovery', while poverty levels and deprivation indicators spiralled upwards in most countries over the past 20 years. A major economic

downturn hit the region between 1999 and 2002, unleashing counter-hegemonic social and political forces that discredited neoliberalism and brought about a new period of popular struggle and change. There is currently an ongoing realignment of social and political forces throughout Latin America whose outcome is uncertain and open-ended.

THE 'PINK TIDE'

The pressures to bring about a shift in the structure of distribution – both of income and of property – and the need for a more interventionist state to bring this about, is one side of the equation in the constellation of social and political forces that seemed to be coming together even before the turn of the century to contest the neoliberal order. Political, economic, and academic elites began to look for an alternative formula to pull the region out of its stagnation and at the same time to prevent – or at least better manage – social and political unrest. These regional efforts paralleled calls by the transnational elite elsewhere for a limited reform of the global system. Prominent left of center leaders and parties, for instance, including Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the Party of the Democratic Revolution in Mexico, Ricardo Lagos of the Socialist Party in Chile, Luis Inácio da Silva (Lula) of the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil, Carlos Álvarez of the FREPASO in Argentina, and Jorge Castañeda from Mexico, drew up the Buenos Aires Consensus in 1998 that called for a renewed social democracy in the region. While the document called for 'growth with equity' and a greater role for the state in assistance to the poor, it was explicit that the logic of the market must not be challenged, nor should an open integration into global capitalism.⁴

If the social democratic elites were explicitly engaged in only modifying neoliberalism, in the decade since the Buenos Aires initiative was launched popular electoral victories in a number of countries brought to power governments that opposed neoliberalism, at least in discourse, and at least initially. These include: Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1998); Lula and the PT in Brazil (2002); Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador (2002 – Gutiérrez was subsequently run from office in a popular uprising in 2005); Lagos and the Socialist Party in Chile (2002) followed by Michelle Bachelet (2006) of the same party; Néstor Kirchner in Argentina (2003); Evo Morales in Bolivia (2005); Tabaré Vázquez and the Broad Front in Uruguay (2004); Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2006), Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (2006); along with near-wins (amidst charges of electoral fraud) for the FMLN in El Salvador (2004); Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico (2006); Ottón Solís in Costa Rica (2006); and Ollanta Humala in Peru (2006).

These popular electoral victories – the so-called ‘pink tide’ – would seem to symbolize the end of the reigning neoliberal order, but they also demonstrate the limits of parliamentary change in the era of global capitalism. The case of Brazil was most indicative of this – and the most tragic for the popular classes. Lula, denied the presidency in three previous electoral contests, won in 2002 only after his wing of the PT moved sharply towards the political center. He forged a social base among middle-class voters and won over centrist and even conservative political forces that did not endorse a left-wing program yet were unwilling to tolerate further neoliberal fallout. Lula promised not to default on the country’s foreign debt and to maintain the previous government’s adjustment policies, thereby indicating that the real power was that of transnational financial capital. Portending what was to come, almost as soon as he took office in 2003 he slashed the budgets for health and education in order to comply with the IMF requirement that the government maintain a fiscal surplus.

Other pink tide governments have attempted to expropriate popular power from below and undercut its transformative potential, most notably in Ecuador and Argentina. In Ecuador, Gutiérrez, a former army colonel, won the 2002 election with the support of that country’s powerful indigenous and social movements after he promised to reverse the neoliberal program of his predecessors and implement popular reforms. Upon taking office he appointed several indigenous cabinet ministers as well as representatives of the local elite and transnational capital. But within months, Gutiérrez capitulated to these conservative political forces in the tenuous governing coalition and reverted to an open neoliberal program. In Argentina, Kirchner strongly criticized the neoliberal policies of his predecessors yet his own program has been limited to minor policy modifications to favour domestic producers and consumers: low interest rates, capital controls, price controls on public services, and the restoration of some social welfare programs, alongside a clientelist cooptation of a portion of the *piqueteros* and other popular movements.

In perhaps what is the most illusory of pink tide governments, Ortega and what remains of the FSLN in Nicaragua have dressed with a leftist discourse what in the pre-neoliberal era would have been characterized as a routine attempt to establish a populist multi-class political alliance under the hegemony of capital and state elites. In the years since the 1990 electoral defeat new Sandinista economic groups developed close business and personal ties with transnationally-oriented capitalist groups while the political leadership negotiated a heavily criticized ‘pact’ to divide up government power with the Liberals, one of the two historically-dominant bourgeois oligarchic par-

ties. While the FSLN retains a mass, if dwindling, base among the country's peasantry and urban poor, many leading Sandinistas grouped around Ortega have become successful businessmen heavily invested in the new transnational model of accumulation, including in tourism, agro-industry, finances, importing-exporting, and subcontracting for the maquiladoras. Their class interests impede them from challenging transnational capital or organizing a transformative project, yet their legitimacy depends on sustaining a revolutionary discourse and undertaking redistributive reforms.⁵

In its first major policy document since taking office in early 2007, the FSLN declared that its project rested on two planks, one political and the other economic. The first, 'citizen power councils', are to incorporate local communities into the 'struggle against drugs, narco-trafficking, gangs, diseases, ignorance, degradation of the environment, and the denial of human rights'.⁶ Absent is any reference to these councils as politicized forums or vehicles for popular self-mobilization; they seem to be conceived as instruments for a controlled incorporation from above of grassroots communities into the state's social control and administrative programs. The second plank, 'economic associations for small and medium producers', calls for 'reorienting economic policies towards these sectors so as to link them up to the large-scale private sector',⁷ that is, to incorporate these small-scale rural and urban producers via credits and technical assistance into the dominant transnational circuits of accumulation through subcontracting and other ancillary activities. The document calls for 'respect for all forms of property', attracting transnational corporate investment, and an agro-industrial model of development.

In fairness, the Sandinista program also contemplates a renationalization of health and educational systems, greater social spending, progressive tax policies, and a literacy campaign, among other popular welfare measures. Yet it is clear that the Sandinistas are part of the same elected left populist bloc in the region committed to mild redistributive programs but respectful of prevailing property relations and unwilling or simply unable to challenge the global capitalist order. This is not very different from what had informed the social democratic thinking that defined the Buenos Aires consensus. Many leftist parties, even when they sustain an anti-neoliberal discourse, such as the PT in Brazil, Vasquez in Uruguay, and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, have abandoned earlier programs of fundamental structural change in the social order itself. What stands out about such 'pink tide' governments is that: (1) there has been no significant redistribution of income or wealth, and indeed, inequality may still actually be increasing; (2) there has been no shift in basic property and class relations despite changes in political blocs, in discourse in

favour of the popular classes, and mildly reformist or social welfare measures. In Argentina, for instance, the percentage of national income going to labour (through wages) and to the unemployed and pensioners (through social welfare subsidies and pensions) dropped from 32.5 in 2001, before the crisis exploded, to 26.7 in 2005. In Brazil the wealthy grew in number by 11.3 per cent in 2005 as inequality deepened.⁸ Moreover programs to subsidize the consumption of the poor and the unemployed, such as *Zero Fome* and *Bolsa Familia* programs in Brazil or social welfare payments plans in Argentina, are financed by taxing not capital but formal sector workers and middle classes. It is increasingly dubious whether viable redistributive strategies are possible without more fundamental changes in property relations. Will this new social democratic tide amount to better local managers of global capitalism than their orthodox neoliberal predecessors? How long can low levels of redistribution hold back the tide of rebellion?

On the other hand, Venezuela is leading a radical anti-neoliberal regional bloc that would appear to include Bolivia under Evo Morales and Ecuador under Rafael Correa. Redistributive reforms have been much deeper in Venezuela than in other pink tide countries and have been linked to the goal of transformations in state structure and property relations to the end of an authentic empowerment of the popular classes, as I will discuss below. Bolivia and Ecuador seem to be following a similar path of more radical reform, even if it is too early to reach conclusions about outcomes. In all three countries there have been constitutional assemblies convened by popular referenda to redraft constitutions in favour the popular classes, a reversal of the most egregious neoliberal policies, a renationalization of energy resources and the use of those resources for social investment. There are ongoing land redistributions in Venezuela and Bolivia and promises of such programs in Ecuador.

Casteñeda, the anti-communist, anti-Cuban, and pro-Washington former Mexican Foreign Minister and a leading social democratic critic of the socialist left in Latin America, argued recently that there are ‘two lefts’ in the region – a ‘right left’ that would include Lula in Brazil, Lagos and later Bachelet in Chile, and Vázquez in Uruguay, and a ‘wrong left’ led by Chávez in Venezuela, and including, of course, Fidel Castro in Cuba, as well as Morales, López Obrador, Humala, and others. The former, ‘the reconstructed, formerly radical left emphasizes social policy – education, antipoverty programs, health care, housing – but within a more or less orthodox market framework’. The ‘wrong left’, according to Casteñeda, has ‘proved much less responsive to modernizing influences.... For all these leaders, economic performance, democratic values, programmatic achievements, and good relations with the United States are not imperatives but bothersome constraints that

miss the real point. They are more intent on maintaining popularity at any cost, picking as many fights as possible with Washington, and getting as much control as they can over sources of revenue, including oil, gas, and suspended foreign-debt payments'.⁹ Never mind the ideologically-driven absurdities in Castañeda's argument – Venezuela, for instance, has the best economic performance in all of Latin America, is rated the most democratic, and boasts the most impressive programmatic achievements. The fact is that there *are* two lefts – a reformist one that dominates the 'pink tide' and seeks to reintroduce a mild redistributive component into the global capitalist program in the region, and a more radical one that seeks a more substantial transformation of social structures, class relations, and international power dynamics.

Most analyses fail to capture the dialectics of class relations and social struggles that have produced distinct dynamics among the 'pink tide' countries. Progressive governments seeking short-term popular objectives spark both opposition from dominant groups and mobilization for more fundamental change from subordinate groups. This in turn opens up new opportunities, confrontation, and further politicization of masses. If transnational capital is able to emasculate radical programs through structural pressures exerted by the global economy, the popular electoral victories and near-victories involved as well the mobilization of new collective subjects and mass social movements show that progressive forces are not easily cowed by the transnational elite. The fate of the pink tide will depend considerably on the configuration of class and social forces in each country and the extent to which regional and global configurations of these forces open up new space and push such governments in distinct directions. Latin America in the early 21st century stands at a crossroad; it has moved into an historic conjuncture in which the struggle among social and political forces could push the new resistance politics into mildly social democratic and populist outcomes or into more fundamental, potentially revolutionary ones.

THE BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION AND RENEWAL OF THE SOCIALIST AGENDA

The 'Bolivarian revolution' took Latin America by storm with the arrival to power in 1999 of Venezuela's charismatic and enormously popular socialist president, Hugo Chávez. By putting forward an anti-capitalist alternative to the more reformist post-neoliberal proposals and by organizing a regional anti-neoliberal power bloc, Venezuela's influence could tip the balance by encouraging social and political forces in Latin America to move beyond a mild reform of the status quo. The Bolivarian revolution is the first radical, socialist-oriented revolution in Latin America – and indeed, the world – since the

defeat of the Nicaraguan revolution of the 1980s. The declaration by the *Chavista* leadership for the first time in 2005 that the Bolivarian revolution would seek to build a '21st century socialism' has major implications for Latin America – and the world – because it put socialism back on the agenda at a time when the ignominious demise of 20th century socialism seemed to discredit the very idea of a socialist project, and when the late-twentieth-century global justice movement stalled as it proved unable to move beyond a negative anti-capitalism.

Apart from the challenge it issues to global neoliberalism and US interventionism, the Venezuelan revolution is significant on at least three counts. First the Venezuelan revolution had impeccable bourgeois democratic legitimacy. Chávez won the 1998 presidential elections by the largest majority in four decades (56.2 per cent) and then went on, between 1999 and 2006, to ratify his democratic legitimacy in another eight electoral contests, including three further presidential votes (in 2000, with 59 per cent of the vote, in 2004 with 59 per cent, and in 2006, with 63 per cent), a constitutional referendum, and several parliamentary, gubernatorial and local elections. Second, the old bourgeois state was not 'smashed' in the revolution. To the contrary, by winning the presidency through an electoral process in an established polyarchic system and a well-institutionalized capitalist state, yet with the mass support of the poor and the popular classes, Hugo Chávez initiated the Bolivarian project from the Miraflores presidential palace while leaving in place a state bureaucracy that would work over the next few years to resist and undermine that project. And third, the poor majority has been engaged in its own autonomous and often belligerent grassroots and community organizing, especially in the teeming slums of the capital city of Caracas, home to four million of the country's 26 million people, and in other major urban areas.

The mass popular base of the revolution is not subordinated to a state and party at the helm of the process, as they were in most revolutionary experiences of the 20th century. What is unfolding in Venezuela is distinct from the old Soviet-statist model, in which political command (domination) emanated vertically from the state/party downwards, the means of production were nationalized and bureaucratically administered, and there was no autonomous space for the working classes and social movements. The Bolivarian model also defies the anarchist-autonomist ideas influential in the global justice movement. *Chavismo* has opened up a remarkable space for mobilization from below. It is in fact the ongoing and expansive mobilization of this mass base that pushed the *Chavista* leadership forward and led the charge against the decadent capitalist state and social order. Class struggle is breaking out everywhere. Popular classes in civil society constitute a beehive

of organizing and mobilizing. So too do counterrevolutionary right-wing forces, who have, nonetheless, steadily lost initiative.

Venezuela may well be in a pre-revolutionary stage still. In its first eight years the revolution was able to reform the political system and pass a new constitution that lays the juridical base for a new society, to break with US domination, recover oil revenues and begin a process of transforming property relations and a new economic model linked to a regional/transnational program of integration and cooperation. A deepening of these developments would entail a more dramatic recreation of the state and the transformation of the means and relations of production.

Chávez first announced at the January 2005 World Social Forum meeting in Brazil that the Bolivarian revolution would construct a '21st century socialism'. 'It is not possible that we will achieve our goals with capitalism, nor is it possible to find an intermediate path', stated Chávez. 'I invite all of Venezuela to march on the path of socialism of the new century. We must construct a new socialism in the 21st century'.¹⁰ Then after Chávez won the December 2006 presidential elections with nearly 63 per cent of the popular vote he announced in a series of speeches in early 2007 that 'a new stage in the Bolivarian socialist revolution has begun. The period between 1998 and 2006 was a period of transition. Now begins the stage of building Bolivarian socialism'.¹¹

Chávez called for what would amount to a revolution within the revolution – to an opening up of all branches of the state to 'popular power' from below and to mechanisms that would permit a 'social comptroller' role by the grassroots over state and public institutions. He called for a 'war to the death' against corruption and bureaucracy, practices that were 'counterrevolutionary currents within the revolution', and for 'a new geometry of power on the national map' and a 'revolutionary explosion of people's power, of communal power' from below.¹² Chávez envisioned a deepening of the role of Communal Councils and their conglomeration locally, regionally, and nationally into a sort of alternative power structure from below, a Paris Commune on a national scale:

We must move toward the formation of a communal state and progressively dismantle the old bourgeois state that is still alive and kicking as we put into place the communal state, the socialist state, the Bolivarian state; a state with the ability to steer the revolution. Almost all states came into existence to hold back revolutions, so this is our challenge: to convert the old counterrevolutionary state into a revolutionary state.¹³

If the Venezuelan revolution's formal democratic legitimacy is impeccable this also presents it with a paradox. As popular sectors mobilize from below, and have become concientized, and politicized, they confront resistance from state institutions that act to constrain, dilute, institutionalize, and co-opt mass struggles, to reproduce the old order. The Venezuelan state is corrupt, bureaucratic, clientelist, and even inert; this was the state inherited from the ancien regime. The civil service bureaucracy and old elites have remained in control of much of the state. It is likely that the popular sectors which achieved a foothold in the state will have to confront them and reconstitute the state on a much more profound level as the process deepens. The more than 20,000 *Consejos Comunales*, or community councils, that have been formed may be indicative of revolutionary possibilities here. Yet even though conceived as organs of popular power, some of these councils are subordinate to state directives and others have become co-opted by corrupt leaders or local bureaucrats. Community leaders I met with spoke of the struggle to convert the councils into autonomous organs of community power that exercise power from below over state and party institutions, to avoid having these local organs appropriated (*secuestrado* or 'kidnapped') from above. They complain that the 'process is moving too slowly', that the 'transition' is taking too long. They are keenly aware of the danger of usurpation by bureaucratic and elite forces from above, a danger just as serious for them as the counterrevolutionary efforts of the old elite and their international allies. The slogan among local activists in the barrios was: 'no queremos ser gobierno pero queremos gobernar' ('we don't want to be the government but we want to govern from below').

Some on the left inside and outside Venezuela, while supportive, criticize Chávez as authoritarian and charge him with cultivating 'personal rule'. The prominent Venezuelan intellectual Margarita Lopez Maya, for instance, has accused Chávez of a 'desire to be the one who is essential to the process' and 'to perpetuate himself in power'.¹⁴ She observes, for example, that in early 2007 Chávez requested of the legislature, and was granted, special powers ('enabling laws') to legislate in 11 policy areas over a year and a half, bypassing deliberations in the parliament and other formal representative institutions, and that he is also attempting to remove limits to his indefinite re-election. These criticisms cannot be dismissed. An authoritarianism of the left, cults of personality, and usurpation from above of popular power from below in the name of subordinate class interests, remain just as much a danger in the 21st century as they were in the 20th. Yet the discourse critical of Chávez is somewhat contradictory. Lopez Maya acknowledges that 'Chávez has successfully mobilized the poor and excluded to fight for first-class citi-

zenship, and among the great majority of Venezuelans, who have never been able to participate in politics and society, many now feel like full citizens'. Yet she is troubled by the measures that have moved the country and the popular classes beyond the limits of polyarchic institutions which have historically excluded or co-opted the poor majority.¹⁵

Popular mobilizations, Lopez Maya observed in early 2007, 'have created very conflictive processes, and the country is now experiencing a very powerful polarization. Over the past few months it has tended to deepen as Chávez has proposed a new break with the past, essentially the destruction of the very state he himself brought into being with the Constitution of 1999'.¹⁶ This, it seems to me, is the crux of the matter. Polarization is less a consequence of Chávez's authoritarianism than an objective and inevitable outcome of the attempt to effect a revolutionary rupture with the old order. The target of Chávez' 'authoritarianism' is not the popular majority but the corrupt and cronyist state of the *ancien régime* and its parasitic bureaucracy through which Chávez came to power – a state he was barely able to modify during his first few years. If there is a strong personal link between Chávez and the masses, it may be explained less by Chávez' desire to cultivate 'personal rule' than by the historic failure of the institutional left in Venezuela and the chasm that exists between it and the popular majority.

CHANGE SOCIETY WITHOUT STATE POWER?

The Venezuelan problematic of revolution and socialism within a capitalist state underscores broader quandaries for popular alternatives to global capitalism in the 21st century. As the struggle for hegemony in global civil society heats up the issue of state power and what to do about it, including national states and the transnational institutions and forums through which they are connected with one another, cannot be avoided. John Holloway's book, *Changing the World Without Taking Power*¹⁷ has elevated to theoretical status the Zapatistas' decision not to bid for state power. The claim that social relations can be transformed from civil society alone appears as the inverse of the old vanguardist model in which social and political forces mobilize through political organizations in order to overthrow the existing state, take power, and use the state to transform society. That model, pursued by much of the Latin American left in the 1960s and 1970s, often through armed struggles, has been recognized by most as a failure and as a dead-end in the new century.

In recent years the indigenous movement in Latin America has spearheaded a new model of horizontal networking and organizational relations in a grassroots democratic process from the bottom up. But at some point popular

movements must work out how the vertical and horizontal intersect. A 'long march' through civil society may be essential to transform social relations, construct counter-hegemony from the ground up and assure popular control from below. Yet no emancipation is possible without an alternative project, and no such project is possible without addressing the matter of the power of dominant groups, the organization of that power in the state (including coercive power), and the concomitant need to disempower dominant groups by seizing the state from them, dismantling it, and constructing alternative institutions. The limitations of strict horizontalism have become evident in Latin America in recent years all the way from Mexico to Argentina.

The Zapatista model generated hope and inspiration for millions throughout Latin America and the world in the 1990s. The January 1, 1994 uprising in Chiapas was an urgent and refreshing response to the capitulation by many on the Left to the TINA ('there is no alternative') syndrome. The Zapatistas insisted on a new set of non-hierarchal practices within their revolutionary movement and within the communities under their influence, including absolute equality between men and women, collective leadership, and taking directives from, rather than giving them to, the grassroots base, leading by following and listening, and so on. Such non-hierarchal practices must be at the very core of any emancipatory project. Yet they also hold strong appeal to the anarchist currents that have spread among radical forces worldwide in the wake of the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' and the old statist-vanguardist Left, and that are unwilling to deal with the wider political system and the state. These currents have a strong influence in the global justice movement and the World Social Forum, as well as among radicalized youth and middle classes in Mexico who provide a base for the Zapatistas beyond Chiapas.

But Zapatismo has not been able to draw in a mass working-class base, and as a result it has experienced a declining political influence on Mexican society. It may still be a force of counter-hegemony or even of hegemony in some communities inside Chiapas, but the fact is that global capitalism has made major headway within Chiapas itself between 1994 and 2007 while the Zapatista movement has stagnated. This conundrum came to a head when the Zapatistas refused as a matter of principle to participate in the campaign that the PRD and Manuel López Obrador waged for the presidency in the 2006 elections. As a result the Zapatistas were ill-prepared to throw their weight behind the mass struggles against the fraud perpetrated by the Mexican state and its two ruling parties, the PRI and the PAN. If it is true, as the Zapatistas observe, that there is no blueprint for revolution, then it is also true that revolutionaries need to be able to shift strategies and tactics as history

actually unfolds. For the Zapatistas, horizontalism became a rigid principle rather than a general emancipatory practice.

In Argentina, the late 2001 uprising marked the beginning of a popular rebellion of workers, the unemployed and the poor, along with newly dispossessed sectors of the middle class. In the wake of the rebellion popular sectors created hundreds – perhaps thousands – of neighbourhood assemblies, workers occupied and took over hundreds of factories, and the unemployed stepped up their mobilization through *piquetero* and other forms of grassroots struggle. Horizontalist thought makes much of the fact that the rebellion erupted without leadership or hierarchy, and that political parties and elites played no role in the movement.¹⁸ Nonetheless, in the ensuing years the occupied factories have not been able to present even a remote alternative to the domination of transnational capital over the economy and the country's ever-deeper integration into global capitalism, especially through the agro-industrial-financial complex based on soy beans, while assemblies and *piqueteros* have become divided in the face of expanding clientelist networks and cooptation by the state and Kirchner's Peronist faction. It is quite true, as the Argentine autonomists point out, that political parties are bankrupt and corrupt and that local and global elites control the state (*'Que se vayan todos!'* – 'Out with them all!'). Yet the *autonomist* movement, with its strict horizontalism, has come no closer to challenging this structure of elite power, nor has it been able to hold back the onslaught of global capitalism.

To dismiss political organizations and the state because they are, or can easily become, instruments of hierarchy, control and oppression, is to emasculate the ability of the popular classes and their social movements and mass organizations to transform the institutions of power and to mount a systemic challenge to the social order. Without some political hammer or political vehicle the popular classes cannot operate effectively vis-à-vis political society or synchronize the forces necessary for a radical transformatory process. As the case of Venezuela, and perhaps Bolivia and Ecuador as well, demonstrate, the situation of disunity between civil and political society is not as stable. Popular forces and classes must win state power and utilize it to transform production relations and the larger social, political, and cultural relations of domination, yet they must do so without subordinating their own autonomy and collective agency to that state. A confrontation with the global capitalist system beyond the nation-state, moreover, requires national state power.

It is notable that the indigenous movements in Ecuador and Bolivia have not followed the Zapatista example. They did not opt to stay in the highlands and the Amazonian region and forego a frontal struggle against the state. Indigenous and popular sectors in Ecuador, led by the powerful Confedera-

tion of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), have sustained a virtual permanent mass mobilization against neoliberalism (and for indigenous rights) since the 1990s. They brought down neoliberal governments on four separate occasions between 1997 and 2005. Yet each time these governments were removed, as one indigenous leader put it to me in 2003, they were replaced with yet another neoliberal government whose policies were equally unaccountable to these sectors. This predicament was due, in part, to the lack of a political vehicle that could serve the popular sectors as a mechanism for exercising some form of institutional control over the state beyond oppositional agitation from within civil society. In 2003 the movement had therefore to place its bets on an alliance with Lucio Gutiérrez, an army colonel who promised an alternative to neoliberalism while participating in the popular overthrow of the neoliberal government of Jamil Mahuad. When Gutiérrez betrayed the popular movement and delivered the country to global capitalism, CONAIE's credibility with its base suffered. In the October 2006 elections the indigenous forces faced a dilemma. Should they support another candidate and risk getting burned? Should they put forward an indigenous candidate along the Bolivian model? In the end CONAIE put forward its own candidate in the 2005 vote but supported Correa in a second round of voting. Since Correa has come to power the mass movement has provided him with critical support while jealously preserving its own autonomous mobilization. Similarly, in Bolivia the indigenous and popular movement threw out several neoliberal regimes and in 2005 put Morales in power while continuing to mobilize in an autonomous manner, both against the elite and the right, and to pressure the Morales government.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

In the age of globalization there are limitations to the reintroduction of a redistributive project at the nation-state level. It is not clear how effective national alternatives alone can be in transforming social structures, given the ability of transnational capital to utilize its structural power to impose its project even over states captured by forces adverse to that project. If the (capitalist) state as a class relation is becoming transnationalized then any challenge to (global) capitalist state power must involve a major transnational component. Struggles at the nation-state level are far from futile. They remain central to the prospects for social justice and progressive social change. The key thing is that any such struggles must be part of a more expansive transnational counter-hegemonic project, including transnational trade unionism, transnational social movements, transnational political organizations, and so on. And they must strive to establish sets of transnational institutions

and practices that can place controls on the global market and rein in some of the power of global capital.

Efforts to reform the global order can only be successful when linked to the transformation of class and property relations in specific sets of countries. The formation of the South American Community of Nations (CSN) under Brazilian leadership in 2003 and the proposal that same year by Lula and his Argentine counterpart Kirchner to move forward with the ‘Buenos Aires Consensus’ have been touted by some among the Latin American Left as a step towards a progressive regional challenge to global capitalism. But it is not clear that the CSN or the Buenos Aires Consensus are anything more than – at best – a mildly reformist path for regional integration into global capitalism. A regional program that attempts to harness market forces for more regionally balanced accumulation and limited redistribution would be an improvement over the rigid neoliberal model vis-à-vis the interests of popular classes, but is hardly a counter-hegemonic alternative to capitalist globalization. Such an alternative would have to be founded on a more fundamental shift in class power at the national and regional levels in Latin America, and would have to involve a transformation of property and production relations beyond limited social redistribution in the phase of surplus circulation. Local class and property relations have global implications. Webs of interdependence and causal sequences in social change link the global to the local so that change at either level is dependent on change at the other level. An alternative to global capitalism must therefore be a *transnational* popular project involving strategies, programs, organizations and institutions that link the local to the national, and the national to the global.

In Venezuela’s popular parlance, ‘endogenous development’ refers to an economic strategy of localized, inward-oriented, and integrative economic activity by self-organized communities that draws on local and national resources, alongside (and apparently subordinated to) trade-related activities, along the lines of what, years earlier, Samir Amin, termed ‘autocentric accumulation’. Clearly an alternative economic model to neoliberalism – in Venezuela and elsewhere – would have to emphasize such a community-centered integrative and self-sustaining economic orientation. Yet the Chavista leadership has also proposed not a withdrawal from international trade and economic integration but an alternative transnational development project – the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, known by its Spanish acronym, ALBA. Indeed, the debate about socialism in Venezuela seems to center on the question of how to build a popular economy that can also trade in the international area. The ALBA envisages a regional economic development plan for Latin America and the Caribbean involving solidarity with the weakest

national economies so that all can cooperate and benefit from regional exchange networks and development projects.

‘Revolution in one country’ is certainly even less viable in the 21st century than it proved to be in the 20th. All national economies have been reorganized and functionally integrated as component elements of a new global capitalist economy and all peoples have experienced heightened dependencies for their very social reproduction on the larger global system. In the case of Venezuela, the oil and financial system is thoroughly integrated into global capitalism. What this integration points to is the structural power that global capital can exercise and the possibility that this structural power will translate into local political influence. Global capital has local representation everywhere and it translates into local pressure within each state in favour of global capital. Those groups most closely tied to global capital, transnationally-oriented business groups, seek to gain increasing influence and quash a more radical transformative project. Indeed, to take the case of Venezuela, the greatest threat is not from the right-wing political opposition but that parts of the revolutionary bloc will develop a deeper stake in defending global capitalism over socialist transformation, that state managers will become bureaucratized as their own reproduction will depend on deepening relations with global capital.

In Brazil the PT took state power largely in the absence of a mass autonomous mobilization from below so that the popular classes could not exert the mass pressure to control the PT government so that it would confront global capital and implement a popular program. The Brazilian model shows that, even when revolutionary groups take state power – absent the countervailing force from popular classes below to oblige those groups to respond to their interests from the heights of the state – the structural power of global capital can impose itself on direct state power and impose its project of global capitalism. In other words, global class struggle ‘passes through’ the national state in this way. This lack of mass mobilization to generate popular pressure from below meant that the dominant groups could absorb the challenge to their interests represented by a PT government. Leftists who came to power in Venezuela faced similar pressures from the global system to moderate structural change. Yet in Venezuela, unlike Brazil, mass mobilization from below placed pressure on revolutionaries in the state not to succumb to the structural pressures of global capital but rather to carry out a process of social transformation.

The transformative possibilities that have opened up in Latin America cannot be realized without an organized Left and a democratic socialist program. Yet such possibilities will only end up frustrated if they fall into the

pattern of top-down change by vanguardist command and the military fetishism, along the lines of the 1960s and 1970s when armed struggle was converted from a means into an end. Nowhere is this more evident than in the ‘military hypertrophy’ of the Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces (FARC), which sees independent political mobilization as a threat to its own efforts to hegemonize resistance.¹⁹ The transformative moment of the early 21st century in Latin America will depend on the Left’s ability to learn the lessons of the previous era of revolution, especially the need to relinquish vanguardism of party and state and to encourage, respect, and subordinate itself to the autonomous mobilization from below of the popular classes and subordinate sectors. In sum, the current round of social and political struggle in Latin America highlights the changing relation between social movements of the left, the state, and global capitalism.

This is precisely why the issue of political organizations that can mediate vertical links between political and civil society is so important. What type of political vehicle can interface between the popular forces on the one hand and state structures on the other? How can internally-democratic political instruments be developed to operate at the level of political society and dispute state power without diluting the autonomous mobilization of social movements? The potential for transformation will depend on the combination of independent pressure of mass social movements from below on the state and also on the representatives and allies of those movements taking over the state. To reiterate, this is why a permanent mobilization from below that forces the state to deepen its transformative project ‘at home’ and its counter-hegemonic transnational project ‘abroad’ is so crucial.

NOTES

- 1 My theory of global capitalism that forms the theoretical backdrop to the matters addressed here can be found in William I. Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class and State in a Transnational World*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- 2 World Bank, *Global Development Finance*, 2006 Report, Washington: World Bank, 2006.
- 3 Polyarchy refers to a system in which a small group actually rules and mass participation and decision-making is confined to choosing leaders in elections that are carefully managed by competing elites. See William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 4 For discussion, see Roberto P. Korzeniewicz and William C. Smith, ‘Poverty, Inequality, and Growth in Latin America: Searching for the High Road to Globalization’, *Latin American Research Review*, 35(3), 2000, pp. 7-54.

- 5 On these details, see William I. Robinson, *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization*, London: Verso, 2003.
- 6 Sandinista National Liberation Front, *Cuaderno Sandinista No. 1: El Nuevo Proyecto Sandinista (Documento de Consulta y Debate)*, Managua, May 2007.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 8 Raul Zibechi, Raul, 'America Latina: La Nueva Gobernabilidad', *ALAI news service*, 23 June 2006 dispatch, datelined Montevideo, available at <http://www.paginadigital.com.ar>.
- 9 Jorge G. Castañeda, 'Latin America's Left Turn', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2006, pp.28-43.
- 10 Gregory Wilpert, 'Chávez Affirms Venezuela is Heading Towards Socialism of 21st Century', *Venezuelanalysis*, 2 May 2005, available at <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com>.
- 11 Hugo Chávez, *Entramos a Una Nueva Era: El Proyecto Nacional Simon Bolivar*, speech on the occasion of the swearing in of the executive cabinet, Caracas, 8 January 2007, published and distributed by the Venezuelan Ministry of Communications and Information, p. 67.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 67, 69.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 14 Fred Rosen, 'Breaking with the Past: A 40th-Anniversary Interview with Margarita Lopez Maya', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 40(3), May-June 2007, pp. 4-8.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 17 John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, London: Pluto Press, 2005.
- 18 Marina Sitrin, ed., *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*, Oakland: AK Press, 2006.
- 19 The phrase 'military hypertrophy' was coined by Forrest Hylton, in *Evil Hour in Colombia*, London: Verso, 2006.