

# Beyond 'Old Wars' and Cold Wars: Political Change in Latin America\*

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*From 1960 to 1990, the Latin American left placed its faith in a strategy of seizing state power, nationalising key sectors of the economy, undertaking land reform and challenging US hegemony. Castro's Cuba was looked to as the main model of what could be achieved. But the undermining of Allende's experiment in Chile, the severe military repression of the 1970s and, most recently, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, have all served to stimulate a fundamental re-think. Now a 'New Left' is beginning to emerge with its roots in the grassroots popular movements. This shuns guerrilla struggle and places more emphasis on people's participation as the only sure means of long-term political change. With the end of the Cold War and amid the new economic realism of the 1990s, the Latin American left is finding new possibilities opening up.*

*'We need a socialism from the South, without dependence on European socialism, which in my experience was never authentic. There now exists the possibility for a new left in Latin America – democratic, popular and participatory – that destroys the totalitarian and vertical nature of the traditional left.'*

– Xavier Gorostiaga, SJ, Nicaraguan economist<sup>1</sup>

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The end of the Cold War looks set to open a new era for the Latin American left. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe has had its reverberations, made somewhat more acute by the fact that the very distance of these countries had allowed the left in Latin America to invest them with a certain idealised content as the antithesis of 'real existing capitalism'. Much more immediately, however, the unexpected defeat of the Sandinistas by the conservative UNO coalition and its presidential candidate Mrs Violeta Chamorro in the February 1990 election came as a major shock to the left throughout the region. The defence of the Nicaraguan revolution against Washington's determined attempts at subversion had been perhaps the single greatest cause around which most of the disparate strands of the left had been able to unite throughout the 1980s. That a substantial majority of the electorate voted for those political groupings closely identified with US policy raised extremely uncomfortable questions. More directly linked to developments in Eastern Europe is the crisis in Cuba which has served to underline starkly the new forms of dependence on the Soviet Union and its former satellites on which the successes of that revolution had been built. Central to the questions raised by these developments is the failure of attempts by the left over the last three decades to find a sustainable alternative model of development. This has stimulated a profound re-assessment among the Latin American left about the goals it espoused and the methods to achieve these.

## The shadow of Cuba

Ever since Fidel Castro and his guerrilla band marched in triumph into Havana on 1 January 1959, the Cuban revolution has exercised a fascination for the left throughout the region. The revolution's radicalisation over subsequent years with its extensive land reform, its nationalisation of foreign firms, its success in raising the living standards of the majority and its defiance of Washington inspired a whole generation to believe that capitalism could be overthrown and a socialist alternative established. Its fascination was probably heightened as it came at a time when the promise of the policy of import substitution industrialisation (ISI), followed by many Latin American countries between the 1930s and the 1950s, had begun to wane. This was an attempt to modernise and industrialise, usually with active state involvement and protected by high

tariff barriers. By the 1950s its limitations had become obvious and, faced with more determined competition from post-war Europe, Latin American governments were implementing austerity measures which directly hit the living standards of workers and sections of the middle classes. The attractions of the Cuban revolution were therefore heightened.

For the Latin American left, the decades 1960 to 1990 can be said to have been lived under the shadow of the Cuban revolution. No matter what the means being used – armed struggle, parliamentary politics or grassroots mobilising – the left believed that through the conquest of state power, the nationalisation of key sectors of the economy, especially those foreign-owned, the implementation of a thorough-going land reform and the challenging of US hegemony in the region, a social revolution was possible.

Many attempts were made to implement such a project. The immediate aftermath of the Cuban revolution saw the emergence of guerrilla movements in many Latin American countries as a younger generation rebelled against the cautious leadership of the traditional left by communist parties. Some of these, such as the Bolivian fiasco in which Ché Guevara was killed on 8 October 1967, or the Mexican rural guerrillas of 1971 constituted no more than a short-lived nuisance to governments. Others, such as the urban guerrilla movements, the Tupamaros in Uruguay and the Montoneros in Argentina, deepened the social crisis and instability in their countries and ushered in brutal military dictatorships. Still others, such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua or the various Guatemalan groups, appeared to have been eliminated but they re-appeared with a renewed strength in the 1970s. Only in Colombia did the guerrilla struggle continue into the 1990s but more as a channel for frustration at the dominance of parliamentary politics by the Conservative and Liberal parties than as a realistic means of achieving state power.

## **Allende and the Chilean road**

The total failure of these groups, especially in the larger and more developed South American countries, may have convinced many on the left of the impossibility of replicating Fidel Castro's road to power but it did not dull their faith in the possibility of social revolution once state power was achieved. That such might be possible through parliamentary politics seemed

vindicated when Salvador Allende won the presidency of Chile in 1970, heading a Popular Unity coalition. He sought to deepen the rather cautious reforms of the previous Christian Democratic administration of Eduardo Frei (1964-70). Through an extensive land reform, the large landed estates were finally broken up and through the nationalisation of the copper industry, Chile's main foreign exchange earner was brought into state ownership. Workers' income rose by 50 per cent in the first year, unemployment fell and inflation was kept under control. The hostility of the US which stopped all economic credits and aid (while increasing aid to the Chilean military) and a fall in international copper prices began to create problems for Allende in 1972. Meanwhile a fall in food production largely caused by the disruption of the land reform as well as active sabotage by a fearful middle class which reached a climax in the employers' strike of October 1972, fuelled social unrest. As emerged later, this was actively fomented by the US which spent \$8 million between 1970 and 1973 to destabilise the Chilean economy.<sup>2</sup> When Allende's Popular Unity increased its vote in mid-term congressional elections in March 1973 from 36 to 44 per cent, serious plotting began for a military coup.

The September 1973 coup served to divert attention away from some of the deep-seated problems facing the Chilean effort at social revolution. By the time the coup came, Allende was finding it ever more difficult to hold his disparate coalition together with the Radicals on the right fearful at the extent of the government's intentions, the Socialists and the Communists in the centre seeking to move forward cautiously and the MIR on the left fomenting more radical action by workers and peasants. The economic disruption caused by sectors of the middle classes such as shopkeepers who created artificial shortages through hoarding and the truck drivers whose strike exacerbated shortages, indicated the limits of Allende's experiment if he was to remain within the bounds of constitutional legitimacy. Economically, his attempts at raising real living standards coupled with a decline in production and sluggish international prices for copper fuelled a runaway inflation. Even if he had the full backing of the military, the Popular Unity experiment was facing severe challenges in the autumn of 1973 and could have continued only through far more extensive state control not only of the economy but of the whole of society. This would have caused increasing tension between the government's commitment to respect parliamentary democracy and the constitutional order and its

desire to implement a thorough social revolution.

Even today, these are hard questions to pose. They can easily be read as providing a certain legitimacy for the nightmare of the Pinochet years that followed. My own experience on a number of visits to Chile during those years was that far from facing any questions about the Popular Unity experiment in an attempt to learn the lessons of its overthrow, the opposition parties were spending their energies continuing to fight among themselves the battles of 1970-73. For the left throughout Latin America, the lessons to be learnt referred not to the economic and political problems facing the Allende government but rather to the role of the US and the Chilean military in its overthrow. Left-wing parties with some chance of winning elections (such as Peru's United Left in 1985) were careful to cultivate contacts in the military and to be vigilant against US destabilisation efforts; deeper questions about the possibility of social revolution through parliamentary democracy went largely unasked.

## The left underground

A major reason why these deeper questions were not addressed was that in many countries the left spent the 1970s trying to survive a most brutal and systematic wave of repression unleashed against it by the military dictatorships which, by the end of the decade, were in power in almost all of Latin America. Known as the national security state, this determined right-wing revolution was motivated by what was seen as the extensive inroads of communism subverting the states of South America and thereby gaining a hold on the American continent from which to subvert the US. It was ushered in by the Brazilian military regime in 1964 which froze wages, banned strikes, took over trade unions and purged critics from politics, academic life and the media. Not only was the left banned, but political life was re-organised with only two parties allowed, the pro-military ARENA and the catch-all opposition, the MDB. As the years went on, the military's grip tightened and by the end of the 1960s torture was being routinely used.

Brazil's example was followed by Bolivia in 1971, Chile and Uruguay in 1973 and Argentina in 1976. The main difference was that, learning from their Brazilian counterparts, these imposed more savage repression from the beginning and dispensed with even the facade of democracy. Blaming the ills of their countries on politicians, these regimes also banned all

political activity and put their faith in what they saw as apolitical technocrats. Under them, 'to disappear' became an active verb as thousands of people were picked up by the military never to be seen again. The number in Argentina is estimated at 30,000 between 1976 and 1980, many of them people with no history of political involvement. The full extent of the repression in Chile did not surface until the report of the Rettig Commission was published in 1991 which documented the cases of 2,279 victims who were disappeared, executed or who died under torture. It was against the left that most of this repression was directed.

## 'Military socialism'

The national security doctrine was in most cases deeply right wing. In a few countries, however, it found expression in a more progressive way as military governments identified poverty and underdevelopment as the greatest threat to security and made a determined attempt to overcome them. Often called 'military socialism', this was best embodied in the regime of General Juan Velasco which took power in Peru in 1968. He proclaimed a nationalist revolution 'to wrest Peru from its apathy and backwardness...to modify radically the traditional structures of our society...to confront those who uphold the status quo.' He moved decisively to implement an extensive land reform, to nationalise the oil and mining sectors and to give workers a share in the ownership and management of industry. Among the regime's most imaginative moves was its expropriation of the country's newspapers from their private owners and their allocation to different social sectors. *El Comercio*, the mouthpiece of the landed oligarchy, was given to the peasantry. Diversifying Peru's former dependence on the US, the regime developed close political and trading links with the socialist bloc and won the warm endorsement of Fidel Castro.

While initially sceptical, the Peruvian left was quickly won over by General Velasco and co-operated extensively with his regime. However, the inherently authoritarian nature of the experiment revealed itself at times as, for example, when the efforts of the military government to organise and mobilise shanty-town dwellers resulted in actions of which it did not approve and to which it responded in typical fashion, with repression. By and large, however, the left maintained its backing and the tide of reform was slowed and eventually reversed only when the ailing General Velasco handed power

over to General Morales Bermudez in 1975 who quickly returned to more orthodox policies.

Other progressive military regimes of the period included those of General Omar Torrijos in Panama (1968-78), General J.J. Torres in Bolivia (1970-71), and General Guillermo Rodriguez Lara in Ecuador (1972-76). While it would be more correct to identify these as nationalist rather than as socialist, they did seek to foster a more independent development for the benefit of the masses and their projects coincided in many ways with both the means and the ends espoused by the left.

## Central America

In the late 1970s and early 1980s most of the larger South American countries returned to democracy. Following the traumatic experience of the national security states and the attempted satanisation of the left, electorates not surprisingly proved cautious in the exercise of their regained right to vote. All the newly elected governments were of the centre-right espousing neo-liberal economic policies. Only in Peru and Uruguay did left wing coalitions gain a respectable vote but as a third force rather than as the principal opposition. Meanwhile attention shifted to Central America with the dramatic victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in July 1979 which proved reminiscent of Cuba twenty years earlier. This emboldened both the Guatemalan and Salvadorean guerrillas who confidently predicted victory before long. In the case of El Salvador this may well have happened but for the election of Ronald Reagan as US president in November 1980. Immediately upon taking office the following January, he made El Salvador the first target of his crusade to stop what he saw as the inroads of communism in the region thus delaying for a further decade any attempt to resolve the conflict and its deep-rooted social causes.

The different fates of the Nicaraguan and Salvadorean revolutions dominated the attention of the Latin American left during the 1980s. As with Cuba, Nicaragua again awakened the hope that a sustainable alternative model of development could be implemented, this time on the American mainland. Advised by Fidel Castro to follow more moderate policies than he had, the Sandinista leadership pledged themselves to a mixed economy, political pluralism and a non-aligned foreign policy. In the early years, modest growth rates were achieved and living standards rose but the experiment was soon undermined by

hostility from the Reagan administration which waged an unrelenting war through both isolating Nicaragua economically and establishing and financing the Contra rebels.

The US invasion of Grenada in 1983 led many in Latin America to fear a similar fate would befall Nicaragua and, without strong opposition within the US and from among its European allies, such may well have happened. But perhaps even more successfully than would have happened through overt US military intervention, the policies of the Reagan administration slowly bled Nicaragua dry. In the face of a US economic blockade and with more and more of its meagre resources going to finance the war, the economy virtually collapsed. By 1990 inflation was running at 13,000 per cent and the foreign debt was 27 times the value of the country's export earnings.<sup>3</sup>

The Nicaraguan experiment was a more moderate attempt at social revolution than the Cuban or even the Chilean ones. It nationalised far less, sought a more gradual raising of living standards and kept a firm grip on any ultra-left adventurism. With a more benign administration in Washington it would have had every chance of achieving modest and sustainable economic growth and of sharing the benefits of this more equitably. But its gradualism meant it was unable to offer dramatic economic and social improvements to most of the population. Visitors to Nicaragua were often shocked by the visible poverty they encountered which appeared to belie the revolutionary rhetoric of the Sandinistas. This is not to underestimate the achievements of the Nicaraguan revolution particularly in the areas of education, health care and land reform; in many ways its gradualism was based on a realistic assessment of the possibilities of the situation which tempered the Sandinistas' left-wing commitment to social revolution. But one wonders whether sectors of the Latin American left would not have been more critical of them if there had been no US campaign of subversion to soak up the left's indignation. Certainly the very gradualism of the Sandinistas placed question marks over the traditional project espoused by the left.

## **New possibilities**

The early 1990s are proving to be a time of profound reflection throughout Latin America. The economic crisis of the 1980s, the acute social problems suffered by so many coupled with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the defeat of the Sandinistas and the crisis in Cuba have opened a major self-



critique on the left about goals and the means to achieve them. This promises to find in the region's own resources new paths towards development with particular emphasis on links with other underdeveloped regions of the world.

The critique of traditional left-wing models imported from Europe has already served to validate what is probably the single most significant political development of the 1970s and 1980s, the growth of what is called throughout Latin America the popular movement. This term covers the myriad forms of social organisation through which Latin Americans survived the political ravages of the 1970s and the economic ravages of the 1980s. It includes food kitchens and mothers' clubs, human rights groups and centres for alternative communication, basic christian communities and local co-operatives, but what they all have in common is that they have grown out of the creative efforts of the poor and marginalised to come together to better their desperate lot. Though far less tidy in organisation and structure than the traditional left, the popular movement has helped the poor find their voice and their power in societies that traditionally excluded and neglected them.

The end of the Cold War also opens a new space for the Latin American left. Since the Second World War, Washington's heavy hand has been active in the internal politics of almost all Latin American countries shoring up the right and seeking to undermine and marginalise the left. With the collapse of the 'communist threat' which Washington used to justify its actions, such overt interference is going to be much more difficult in the years ahead. This is particularly true since the peaceful transfer of power from the Sandinistas to Mrs Chamorro in April 1990 proved wrong Washington's long-repeated dictum that revolutionary regimes would never peacefully hand over power and that covert means to subvert even democratically elected governments were therefore justified. Though some in Washington may claim that continuous US pressure on the Sandinistas was what led to this transfer of power, such justifications are going to be increasingly hard to sell to the US electorate in the post-Cold War world. This is not to say that Washington could not find another pretext to justify its deeply ingrained habits; the 1989 invasion of Panama served notice that stopping the drugs trade and its supporters may be one such. Despite this, however, the end of the Cold War opens new possibilities for political forces to emerge that might more effectively and more accurately represent the aspirations of the majority of Latin Americans.

A new realism is also evident among the Latin American left. The glamour and even mystique often associated with armed struggle in the past has tended to be replaced in recent years by a more sober assessment of the demands of building an enduring base of popular support. This coincides with a shift in power within the left away from the more extremist movements associated with the use of armed struggle towards more moderate groups firmly committed to parliamentary democracy. It is to this shift that Jorge G. Castañeda, professor of political science in the National Autonomous University of Mexico, seems to be referring when he writes: 'The very idea of an overall alternative of any sort to the status quo has been severely questioned. It is now practically impossible for the left to think outside of the existing parameters of present-day Latin American reality. Moreover, the idea of revolution itself, central to Latin American radical thought for decades, has lost its meaning.'<sup>4</sup>

## Guerrilla wars

It is significant also that two of the region's most persistent guerrilla wars, in El Salvador and Colombia, appear close to resolution through negotiation rather than through military victory. In both countries, the guerrillas have realised the limitations of armed struggle and are finding new space through negotiation within what were political systems rigidly controlled by the right. In El Salvador, talks between the FMLN guerrillas and the government, under UN auspices, led the two sides to sign an agreement in September 1991 which, among other things, promised to limit the role of the military, to abolish the country's various police forces and create a totally new force and to re-integrate the rebels into the country's political life. If implemented, these reforms promise the long-suffering people of El Salvador the best prospect of a lasting peace they have yet had and the elimination of some of the main causes which drove various left wing parties in the late 1970s and early 1980s into armed struggle. In Colombia, the left represented mainly by the former guerrillas, the M-19, has emerged as the second largest political force in a constituent assembly writing a new constitution. The guerrillas' decision to enter electoral politics has therefore ended the stranglehold of the two main parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, on electoral politics. The electoral success of the M-19 has acted as a very real incentive to other guerrilla groups to negotiate ceasefire agreements with the government. Thus Latin America's longest guerrilla war is being

brought to an end through negotiation and compromise on both sides.

In Peru, on the other hand, the brutal guerrilla campaign of Sendero Luminoso and its extension over more and more of the country since it first began in 1980 marks the emergence of a new and more frightening form of guerrilla struggle. Unlike other Latin American guerrilla movements which sought to build a base of popular support among the poor, such as its rival MRTA in Peru, Sendero often resorts to terror tactics to intimidate the rural population to carry out its commands. Motivated by a rigid ideology and deeply authoritarian in outlook, Sendero seeks to extirpate capitalism in Peru as a prelude to a world revolution and thus often makes social projects aiming to better the lot of the poor its particular target. Dismissed by Peruvians and particularly by the parliamentary left in the early 1980s as a band of adventurers, the country has watched with a growing sense of powerlessness the advance of this hidden enemy within. The Peruvian left regards Sendero as a group of dangerous terrorists which has done immense damage to the poor of the country and which, if it ever came to power, would instigate a reign of terror similar to that of Pol Pot in Cambodia in 1975-78. Already, due to the activities of Sendero and the equally terrorist counter-insurgency campaign of the armed forces, Peru has become a land of daily violence and death and, according to the UN, has every year since 1987 been the country with the greatest number of disappearances in the world. Castañeda writes that Sendero Luminoso 'may well be the last revolutionary organisation to survive in Latin America, largely because its isolation from the rest of the hemisphere makes it relatively impervious to the disappearance of the revolutionary paradigm and the corollary notion of permanence.'<sup>5</sup>

Peru is certainly an exception. In other countries, new political forces are emerging which give grounds for some hope amid the grim social and economic crisis throughout most of the region. Most notable among these is the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil whose candidate, Luis Inacio da Silva known as Lula, surprised all observers by coming second in the country's first presidential election for almost three decades in December 1989. The PT has emerged as Brazil's first left-wing party with mass support having grown out of the popular movement, in particular the basic christian communities, during the military dictatorship. With social democratic, Marxist Leninist, Trotskyist and other tendencies organised within it, it is the first grass-roots party to break the hold of the wealthy elite on

Brazilian politics.

Even more amazing was the election of Fr Jean-Bertrand Aristide as president of Haiti in December 1990 with 67 per cent of the vote while his nearest rival managed a mere 15 per cent. Again, he emerged from the popular movement which had grown up under the Duvalier dictatorship and he found his support base in it. His sudden overthrow in a coup seven months after he took power came as a surprise as it was thought his widespread international support, including that of the Bush administration, would stay the hand of the military. Yet, even if Fr Aristide does not, Gorbachev-like, regain power after this coup, his election has itself been a lesson to the poor of their potential political power. The right will find it much more difficult to continue ruling Haiti as if it were their personal fiefdom. The overthrow of Fr Aristide may show the difficulties facing the new left but it does not negate its emergence as a political force.

Another surprising example of the emergence of a new politics is in Mexico which has effectively been a one-party dictatorship under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) since 1917. In the July 1988 presidential elections, the left-wing candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the National Democratic Front won 31 per cent of the vote while Carlos Salinas, the PRI's candidate, was elected president with only 50.36 per cent, the party's lowest vote ever. Moreover, evidence emerged of widespread fraud by the ruling party prompting many to believe Cárdenas won a far higher vote. The son of former president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), his split with the ruling party in 1987 catalysed a fragmented left-wing opposition with strong roots in the popular movement. The promise of the 1988 elections, however, was not sustained in midterm congressional and local elections in August 1991 when the PRI regained many of the seats it had lost to the left. It remains to be seen whether the PRI has successfully regained its hegemony or whether its success in the 1991 elections, due to a large extent to the promise of economic progress held out as a result of the free-trade pact being negotiated with the United States, will prove temporary.

## Indigenous left

There are therefore certain similarities among the new political forces emerging. They incarnate a new indigenous left, more

pragmatic in its politics but with a broad-based support often lacking the traditional left. No longer does it offer a seemingly instant, painless solution to national ills but it does promise a more effective management of the nation's affairs with the state playing a key role in partnership with the private sector in modernising and developing the economy. It resists the wholesale privatisation so beloved of the neo-liberal governments it opposes but it does admit the need for selective privatisation. It identifies the foreign debt as the greatest obstacle to development and proposes a negotiated limitation of repayments. In Brazil for example, the Workers Party proposed a detailed inventory of the country's foreign debt to show how much of it was actually used for the purpose of national development. The party said that this was the only amount for which it would assume moral responsibility should it be elected to government.

Paradoxically, it is the liberal governments currently ruling Latin America which have offered the instant, utopian solutions which were the stock-in-trade of the traditional left. Through their 'shock' austerity programmes, they claim to be able to eliminate inflation and through massive privatisation, to liberate enterprise. These packages, agreed by the International Monetary Fund, are also said to be the prerequisite for foreign investment to come pouring in. While such policies have hit the already precarious living standards of the poorest, they have not succeeded in putting any of the economies in which they have been implemented on a steady path to growth. Even such a financially respectable source as the Inter-American Development Bank stated in its 1990 annual report: 'Drastic fiscal adjustment, inflation and stabilisation programmes have unquestionably exacerbated the problems of poverty existing at the beginning of 1990.'<sup>6</sup>

In admitting the enormous difficulties that face the Latin American economy, the left is being more honest. Not only do prices for many of the region's primary exports continue to fall but the prices of most of its imports continually rise. Despite this, many countries managed to achieve healthy export surpluses during much of the 1980s, often by diverting goods from domestic consumption and curtailing imports, at enormous social cost. Yet these surpluses went to pay interest on the region's foreign debt; a commercial balance of \$28 billion in 1989 only serviced 73 per cent of Latin America's debt.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, though many countries have had a certain success in boosting non-traditional exports, most are still dependent on one product for a large percentage of export

income. A decade of economic crisis has severely hit investment in infrastructure further setting back prospects for economic growth. And, particularly with Europe providing far more attractive prospects, foreign investment in the region remains sluggish. So sombre are some observers about the region's economic future that they use the term "Africanisation" to describe the growing stagnation and decay they foresee for much of Latin America as it falls ever further behind the world's most expanding economies.

Not all would agree with this depressing scenario, however. The greater sense of realism being displayed both in the Bush administration and among European governments about the international debt crisis, in particular their admission of the principle of debt forgiveness, raises hopes in Latin America that the problem is nearing some mutually acceptable solution. Moves are also gaining momentum for greater economic integration both within the region and between Latin America and the US with Mexico and Chile leading the way in concluding free trade agreements with Washington. These moves have been given a general welcome in Latin America though some have questioned whether they might prove a mechanism for even greater foreign control of their economies.

While offering no guarantee of economic development, these moves do promise to put in place some of the necessary preconditions which could stimulate sustained growth in today's international environment. So aware are many Latin Americans of the failure of traditional models of development in the region and so desperate to find new approaches to lift their peoples out of grinding poverty, that decision-makers are embracing free trade with the zeal of the convert. Whether these new approaches can be used to promote a model of development offering a better livelihood and social benefits for the majority of Latin Americans or whether they do in fact become mechanisms for even greater foreign exploitation may well depend on the governments which will steer Latin America through the coming challenges.

## **The popular movement**

In this regard, the political history of the region, with its many and unpredictable changes of government and erratic swings in policy may not offer great hope. If there are signs of a new left emerging, there is no guarantee this will get to power or, if it does, that it will remain long in power. The emergence of a

strong popular movement, already referred to, does in effect, however, act to enfranchise in a politically conscious way sectors of the population which previously were easily manipulated. A dramatic example of this was the rejection by the Peruvian electorate of Mario Vargas Llosa in the 1990 election, despite his sophisticated media campaign, in favour of Alberto Fujimori seen by many as an outsider like themselves.<sup>8</sup> It is these politically conscious poor who elected Fr Aristide in Haiti, and who almost elected Lula in Brazil and even Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in Mexico. In Nicaragua also, such voters made up a large section of the 40 per cent of the electorate who continued to support the Sandinistas in the 1990 election despite the mess the country was in.

While they constitute a vital new element in the electoral arithmetic of Latin America, significant sectors of the country's poor masses have also learned new forms of self-reliance and solidarity through the popular movement. Survival amidst the economic chaos of the 1980s has for many depended upon an ingenuity, creativity and resourcefulness which would be the envy of many successful entrepreneurs. Indeed some liberal theorists have seen in this 'informal sector' the seeds of a popular capitalism taking root. This is to impose categories on the phenomenon which fail to do it justice. Far more could one see in it the seeds of a popular socialism as it is a process through which the marginalised empower themselves and seek a share in the wealth of their society through their own organisation. Its influence can also be seen in the growing awareness among Latin Americans that greater emphasis will have to be placed in future on satisfying basic needs rather than on sacrificing all for the sake of exports as happens too often at present.

Marginalised women are perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of this process. Where the feminist movement in the North has been a largely middle class affair, in Latin America it has put down deep indigenous roots through the popular movement. Marginalised women are often to the forefront of local organisations, of protests, of political struggle. It was a poor woman, Luiza Erundina de Souza, who was elected mayor of São Paulo for the Workers Party in 1988, a powerful position as head of South America's largest city and the centre of Brazilian industry. The Latin American feminist agenda is a far more social and even revolutionary one than in the North, therefore, though it is also challenging sexist roles through its attack on traditional Latin *machismo*.

# Reassessment

The search for a new left-wing project is also raising questions about Latin American identity and leading many to look back again at its indigenous past and the achievements of the region's peoples before the coming of the European conquerors. As the Peruvian anthropologist Rodrigo Montoya has written: 'Ours was not an empty continent. Great advances had been made in agriculture, water systems and earthquake resistant construction, for example. Here, the Inca overcame hunger, at the same historical time when hundreds of thousands of people died from starvation in Europe... America gave to Spain and the rest of Europe, the potato, corn, tomatoes, gold, silver and the idea of a just society in which people do not die of hunger.'<sup>9</sup>

The idea of a just society in which people do not die of hunger remains a profound aspiration throughout Latin America. If it has not been achieved, it is not through want of trying as is testified to by a seemingly irrepressible urge which re-appears constantly in every era of the continent's history. And that history has, over the centuries, come to include as actors ever wider sectors of the Latin American people. In recent decades, the masses have decisively entered the political stage as actors and not, as in the developed North, as consumers or passive onlookers. The challenge facing the Latin American left now is to fashion a project through which the poor and marginalised majority can enhance their power and use it to build a new society of justice and equality.

## Footnotes

1. Interview with Xavier Gorostiaga SJ in *Latinamerica Press*, 19 July 1990, pp.6&7.
2. The figure of \$8 million was revealed by the director of the CIA, William Colby, to a US Congressional Committee in April 1974. This information, given at a classified hearing, was leaked to the press a few months later leading Congress to set up a special inquiry on the matter. More comprehensive information on US destabilisation efforts is contained in the report of the US Senate's Church Select Committee 'Covert Action in Chile 1963-73' published in December 1975.
3. 'Central American Economy' in *The Christian Science Monitor*, international edition, 19-25 April 1991, p.11.
4. 'Latin America and the End of the Cold War' by Jorge G. Castañeda in *World Policy Journal*, Vol VII, No 3, summer 1990, pp.469-492. The quote is on p.478. The author is currently writing a book on the future of the Latin American left.
5. *Ibid.*, p.479.



6. 'Latin American poverty 'deepened' by reforms' in *The Financial Times*, 8 April 1991, p.5. The IADB does, however, go on to say that despite its short-term costs, a policy of economic reform is the best hope for medium to long-term growth.
7. 'Latin America and the Caribbean: Economic Problems' by Robin Chapman, in *South America, Central America and the Caribbean 1991*, Europa Publications Limited, London, 1990, p.6.
8. Vargas Llosa's own account of his election campaign as well as those of his press officer (his son) and his PR consultant are published in *Granta*, No 36, Summer 1991.
9. Rodrigo Montoya, 'Latin America: 500 years of conquest' in *Latinamerica Press*, 26 April 1990, p.5.

