

The Future of the Latin American Left and the Currency of its Commodities*

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In the last dozen years people in Latin America have elected several presidents who have claimed to stand for ideals associated with the Left and with socialist principles; today, more than 300 of the over 500 million people

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who make up Latin America are now ruled by these governments. How to make sense of this transformation?

Needless to say, this is hugely complex process that challenges our expertise as well as our interpretive frameworks. For example, even referring to this turn as a “Leftist” is problematical, since, in addition to the usual ambiguities of the term “Left,” what’s happening in Latin America involves some movements that challenge Western modernity including its political categories, such as the notions of Right and Left.

Still, for lack of a better term, I use the conventional term “Left” here to refer to this process, yet I use unconventionally as a very fluid signifier to refer to struggles not just towards equality, Norbert Bobbio’s main criterion to define the Left, but also towards specific conditions that give equality specific significance in Latin America at this time of renewed utopian dreams, such as liberty, justice, plurality and difference, and harmony with our Natural habitat.

Indeed, one of the features of this “Leftist Turn” has been the proliferation of utopian thought inspired by ever more diverse sources.

In fact, in order to make sense of this Leftist turn, I have narrowed my focus to the utopian imaginary the animates the Left—its images of an ideal future. For this I am inspired by an insight by Reinhart Koselleck—the idea that when historians study what happened in the past, they should include the imaginaries of the future

that informed the past, for even if these futures never came to be, they were a historical force and affected the development of history. These imagined futures Koselleck called “future pasts.”

In this presentation I will focus then on these futures, but not of the past, but of the present—what could be called futures present, or present futures. This is already a bounded topic, but I draw even more precise boundaries around it. I focus on how imaginaries of the future inhabit the state, the nation’s representative and main agent of “progress”. While I take into account everyday political actions, discourses, plans, projects, and constitutions, I try to discern how the ineffable imaginaries of the future inhabit present the present, current state-making, how the “what is to be” saturates the “what is” or, in Koselleck’s terms, the relation between the “space of experience,” that is, what has happened, and the “horizon of expectation,” that is, what is hoped will happen.

While I’m concerned with a topic that perhaps may seem ineffable—images of the future—I’m also interested in the conditions of possibility of these imaginings of the future. My argument centers on making connections between what Latin Americans are imagining as their ideal future and the economic and historical conditions that condition these imaginings—in particular, the significance of specific export commodities.

Let me express at the outset my core insight, an argument suggested by the title. My title, “The Future of

the Latin American Left and the Currency of its Commodities” seeks to evoke the themes I’m trying to relate here. One of my central arguments is that the primacy accorded by all governments in Latin America—whether Rightist or Leftist—to primary commodities affect the way the future is imagined—the currency of these commodities conditions the historicity of the Left as a historical force.

This temporal tension creates a paradoxical situation which I seek to explore here: there is indeed in the region a resurgence of political activism inspired by Leftist and even socialist ideals. Yet, at the same time, there is a pervasive uncertainty with respect to the future. My argument is that the Left now pursues a better future, but its particular content eludes it; it has a sense of direction but no clear destination. The Left does not have a map, but it has compass. This creates a particular kind of historicity, a sort of crisis of futurity—the form and effects of this futurity is main subject of this talk.

My talk is divided in three parts. First, I will offer a very brief outline of the historical context in which this Left has emerged. In the second part I will offer a way of thinking about differences among Latin American countries, a scheme or typology based on historical and structural principles, and the third, and the core of the paper, an exploration of the Left’s future.

Ok, now the First part: I will discuss the context of the rise of the Left by briefly mentioning three conditions that have affected its development.

1. The first condition was the global crisis and collapse of really existing socialism at the end of the 20th century, symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the deep immersion of China in capitalist markets and logics. This collapse was widely interpreted not just as a crisis of particular historical socialisms, but as the historical end of socialism. This collapse led to the second condition:

2. The apparent global victory of capitalism. As soon as one of the two rivals of the 20th century in the struggle for world supremacy vanished, it seemed that the other was not just victorious, but that its victory was permanent. As if blinded by victory, ideologues of capitalism claimed that its promise of universal progress was now to be globally achieved. In 1989 John Williamson coined the term “Washington Consensus” to refer to a decalogue of policy prescriptions, a sort of religious ten commandments that would ensure that all nations, even those with serious economic problems, would achieve economic growth if they followed these commandments—heaven on earth. This fantasy of universal progress became best expressed by Francis Fukuyama’s famous 1989 article (and 1992 book) in which he proclaimed that “end of history,” meaning that the global generalization of the free market would dissolve ideological divides, ensure progress, and lead to universal harmony. This dream of progress, however, led to a nightmare—and this is the third condition:

3. The actual effects of free market policies: polarized societies, growing global inequality, ecological destruction, massive exclusion of populations, and the subordination of production to financial speculation. These effects undermined the capitalist system not just in the global South, but at its very center.

These conditions affected Latin America in significant ways. In almost every country there took place, first, of course, the implementation of free market policies, then protests against privatization and the dismantling of the welfare state, then movements to change specific conditions, such as unemployment or the exclusion of indigenous communities, and finally the election of a number of presidents who promised to change society and claimed to stand against neoliberal policies.

Most journalists and academics mark the shift to the Left with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998; I prefer to identify this turn with the electoral defeat of Pinochet ten years earlier, in 1989. No matter which date one chooses, both dates are landmarks of a process characterized by the commitment to make democracy mean political as well as social Rights. Since the election of Chávez, this conception of democracy has been developed even further than in Chile in 1989—it now involves a more explicit rejection of neoliberalism and an even a more intense commitment to promote of public welfare. These goals have been the stated aims of the Leftists presidents who were elected in the following years: in 2002,

Lula in Brazil; in 2004, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, and Tabaré Vasquez in Uruguay; in 2005, Evo Morales in Bolivia; in 2006, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and again Chávez in Venezuela; in 2008, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay; in 2009 Pepe Mujica in Uruguay; and in 2010, Dilma Rouseff in Brazil.

As you can see, this set of presidents have ruled over a large and diverse group of countries. I believe that the most influential typology developed to make sense of this turn to the Left is still the one proposed by Mexican scholar and politician Jorge Castañeda, who in a 1993 article published in the influential journal *Foreign Affairs* divided the Left in Latin America into the Good and the Bad: at one end he placed the “open-minded and modern Left,” represented by Lula da Silva, and at the other end he put the closed-minded and populist Left, represented by Hugo Chávez. Since then many schemes have been created but most have repeated this dualistic typology, but have made opposite evaluations—Lula as the compromising reformist, and Chávez as the true revolutionary.

Seeking to avoid flat dichotomies, or at least to turn them into meaningful distinctions, I offer a scheme that seeks to explore the Left’s futures in Latin America by focusing on the conditions of possibility of historical change facing each nation. My scheme centers on the interplay between political and economic conditions.

Political conditions. In countries that have experienced recent dictatorships and severe political repression, the Left has tended to underplay the notion of revolution or socialism, to emphasize formal democratic procedures, to establish broad alliances and political compromises, and to project socialist principles into the distant future. The tone of politics is moderate. Here the clearest examples are Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay; I'll call these the BrAC countries (taking Brazil, Argentina and Chile as exemplars).

On the other hand, in countries that come from periods of political and social instability, involving the insurgency of excluded indigenous populations or popular sectors, the Left tends to promote basic constitutional changes, to be confrontational, and to take up openly the banner of revolution and socialism. The tone of their politics is radical (or immoderate). Here the paradigmatic examples are Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia—VEBo countries.

Material conditions. A twin set of core economic conditions have fundamentally affected the relations between state and society during this shift to the Left: how a nation's economic surplus is produced and how a nation obtains foreign exchange.

While the production of an economic surplus depends on the relation between capital, land, and labor (a central concern for both classical liberal and Marxist theories) the capture of foreign exchange depends on the relation

between the national and international economies. When analyzed together, these two factors make visible the critical but insufficiently recognized role of ground rents in Latin American economies as “nature-intensive” or resource-based societies.¹

There are two major type of ground rents, agricultural and mineral, and they have different social implications. Whereas agricultural lands are typically privately owned and tend to be the foundation of landowning classes, mines are generally owned by the nation and controlled by the state, and their rents give the state political power and economic resources.

In the Latin American context, the dominance of agricultural rents generally goes together with a dispersion of economic and political power, a relatively diversified economy, a strong business sector, and a structural conflict between exporters and consumers over the allocation of agricultural goods as either sources of foreign exchange or as domestic consumer goods (an argument famously developed for Argentina by Guillermo O'Donnell).

During this Leftward swing, in countries where agricultural rents are central in a national economy, they have tended created conditions for the forging of alliances between classes and interest groups, the negotiation

1 I discuss these concepts and issues in Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, 45-66.

of policies between the state and major sectors, and the promotion of a moderate political style, as occurs in the BrAC countries—Brazil, Argentina, and Chile.

Mineral rents, in contrast, tend to promote the concentration of power in the state as representative of the nation, the creation of a subsidized and dependent business sector, and a structural conflict over the distribution of collective rents among citizens who have equal Rights over these rents but have unequal influence over the state that distributes them.

At this time, mineral rents have made possible the concentration of power in the state, the dependence of the private sector on the government, and the development of a radical or immoderate political style—often called “populist”—that has intensified conflicts between the state and the private sector, as well as between classes and regions, as occurs in the VEBo nations—Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

Of course, this simple scheme only begins to apprehend the complexity of each situation, not only because other factors also contribute to define each national context, but because these two factors may have complementary as well as conflicting effects. For instance, as an example of other factors, IMF Loans are also a source of foreign exchange and exert considerable political influence—they conditioned the politics of Lula in Brazil. The IMF gave Cardoso a 30 Billion dollars loan in 2002, but with the condition that he would receive

only 6 billion, and the next president would receive 24, for which all candidates had to sign an agreement—it was known that Lula was going to win. As someone said in relation to this, the IMF *not vota, pero veta*—the IMF does not vote, but it can exert veto power.

An example of conflicting factors: while Chile is an icon of the BrAC countries in which alliances are established and state power is more dispersed, even at the height of Pinochet's neoliberal project, the copper industry remained in the hands of the state, free from the free market, and copper income (and foreign exchange) granted the state extraordinary financial resources and domestic political leverage. Now with the increase of copper prices the State has even more power.

While these conditions make it possible to imagine the future in different ways, it is clear that for all these countries this period does not involve the end of history, but has become a time for struggles over History. Now History is Back—but what future inspires their history?

And this is the question I wish explore now, the last and main part of this paper.

The first thing to note is that what is rather exceptional at this juncture is not that the Future is Back, for Latin America has typically experienced history as a grand historical process, but that now it is not clear where History is going. While in the past elites had a good sense of the future, now the future is uncertain.

The ideal future imagined by Latin American elites was always already known because it was the present of metropolitan centers. In the 20th century, particularly after the decolonization of Africa and Asia following WWII, like most nations in the Third World, a category created then, Latin American nations sought to achieve modernity mainly by pursuing one or two models: capitalism, the trajectory of the first world, or socialism, the path of the Second World.

But now, facing the bankruptcy of socialism and the severe problems of capitalism, particularly as experienced in the South, Latin America cultural and political elites on the Left, confront the lack of guiding models; they face a crisis of futurity.

The current Leftist regimes in Latin America face this crisis in different ways, in part in light of the different conditions outlined here. Here I explore the *Gestalt* of this horizon of expectations, the common “future form” confronting Latin America through five interrelated themes, five faces of the same crystal ball.

1. AGITATED PRESENT, SPECTRAL FUTURE

By an “agitated Present and a spectral future” I mean a modality of historicity, of being in the world, in which the future, the horizon of expectation, appears phantasmatic, as if it were a space inhabited by ghosts from the heroic past and foggy dreams of ideal worlds, and the present takes shape as a dense field of nervous agitation,

constantly entangled in multiplying constraints, a conglomeration of contradictory tendencies and activity leading to no clear destination.

Despite even significant achievements, a nightmarish sensation of being trapped saturates the present, as if it were jammed or moved without advancing or advancing the wrong direction. Even when states manage to promote economic growth and public welfare (for example, Brazil), the ideal future remains elusive, threatened by chronic problems and newly emerging obstacles or by the sense that a capitalist future is not what the Left has fought for.

This agitated present is not only spasmodic or effervescent, but expansive: it prolongs itself through time within ever expanding constraints. While the present comes to occupy the space-time of what may be measured as the chronological future, it does not become the Future itself, insofar as the future is imagined not just as the time that lies ahead but as the anticipated epoch of transcendence, of historical fulfillment. This anticipated future keeps appearing and receding like a mirage, a haunting promise that threatens to always be a deferred presence.

Nationalist leaders in Latin America, including those on the Left, have commonly defined the promised future as a “second independence”: the achievement of economic and cultural autonomy, of real, as opposed to formal, political independence. In the past, this goal typically

had a specific historical foundation: the wars of independence, which broke the colonial link and established Latin American nations as formally independent republics.

Claudio Lomnitz, in a lucid article on the turn to the Left in Latin America, focused on seven heterogeneous “motifs”, one of which was the tendency for all Left regimes now to establish more varied foundational moments for their current struggles: as he argued, Evo Morales places the foundation of his regime in Bolivia’s five hundred years of anticolonial resistance; Hugo Chávez defines it through the heroic leadership of Bolívar in the wars of independence; Michelle Bachelet hails Allende’s struggle for democratic socialism; Néstor Kirchner used to claim as his own Argentina’s Peronist progressive culture; Lula links himself to Brazil’s transition to democracy in 1983; and Tabaré Vázquez highlights Uruguay’s social-democratic legacy of the 1920s. Juxtaposing temporal scales and historical epochs, as Lomnitz noted, this foundations moments combine different epochs—precolonial, early republican, popular regimes, and democratic socialism. As he perceptively noted, a multiplicity of “ghosts now haunt the new Foundationalism.”

Of course, this return to a heroic past is an old habit. However, its reiterative character at this moment, the insistence to refer constantly to these founding moments, reveals a distinctive anxiety concerning the future. Now this grounding in the past reflects not just the need to legitimate current struggles for the desired future in

a heroic past. It also reveals a certain fear that the desire future, its very being, has become ethereal. Facing a groundless future, and moving slowly towards it, the Left must repeatedly ground itself in the past.

As the uncertain long term recedes, the short term expands, digging into the past to resurrect its icons and pushing the anticipated historical future beyond an ever-receding horizon. Without clear alternative images of the future, struggles must focus on the here and now. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos has noted, the Left had claimed for itself the long term, the overwhelming dominance of capitalism has now restricted Left to the short term. (One must recognize, however, that liberal thought also has claimed the long term for itself—the very term “long term” was created by a liberal economist, Alfred Marshall, in his *Principle of Economics*.)

In my view, these constraints have produced a rather peculiar relation between practices and ideals in the short and long term. While Leftist governments proclaim socialist ideals for the long term, they promote capitalism in the short term. And while they promote capitalism in the short term, they regard capitalism as unviable for the long term. So we have a a funny situation: capitalism for a present without a future, and socialism for a future without a present.

When these tensions prevail, they make quicksand of the present. People must keep moving to stay on top, torn between the utopian desire to find a secure land for

all and the individualistic urge of self-preservation that compel many to desert collective project. This quicksand has been a fertile ground for corruption, a general practice at this time.

2. BEYOND REFORM AND REVOLUTION

Revolution keeps being the ideological mantra of Leftist regimes, but its meaning has changed. During the 20th century, “revolution” became the keyword of nationalist politicians. It was used to signify basic change, a means to bring the present into the future. Most governments in Latin America, of all ideological positions, claimed to be revolutionary, even when they actually sought to contain radical change.

Particularly after the Cuban revolution, for the Left, revolution came to identify two processes and to have two meanings: taking over the state through armed struggle, and unleashing radical change from the state. The defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in the elections of 1989 seems to have closed this cycle of armed revolutionary struggle.

Now armed struggle is not the path to revolution; as the World Social Forum proposes, revolution, including the seizure of power, should be carried out by democratic means.

But even in this case, there are different ways of conceptualizing the state's role in this process. Chávez has

converted the state in the agent of the revolution, first through reforms inspired in a vague model of the third way, and after 2005 through what he has called a new socialism, “socialism of the 21st century.” A similar path is being pursued by Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Following my typology, the VEBo countries (typified by Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia) more openly endorse socialism, transform the political system by rewriting constitutions, and by promoting policies associated with socialist conventions, such as the nationalization of enterprises.

At the other end, BrAC countries (exemplified by Brazil, Argentina and Chile) take more moderate positions and use existing institutions to focus on redistributive policies and social reforms. In Chile the *Concertación* governments had sought to focus on a wide range of specific policies, such as housing and health, that seek to democratize society, without invoking socialism per se. José Insulza, the General Secretary of the Organization of American States, who served the *Concertación* government for ten years, told me that he calls this approach, one that avoids general labels and focuses on a set of particular policies, “socialism by enumeration.”

Despite their differences, all these Leftist governments claim to be involved in some sort of “revolution” but they seek revolutionary change, even in the case of Chávez, through reforms.

3. BEYOND THE SINGLE REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECT

The recent turn to the Left in Latin America has taken place through the actions of a large diversity of actors. This contrasts with a historical tradition in which the Left was identified with political parties or organizations that claimed to represent workers and peasants as the main agents of revolutionary change.

In the last thirty years, as problems proliferated in Latin America, there took place a general disenchantment with traditional political parties and with conventional politics. In this context, new social movements came to play a significant role in politics, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil, the Piqueteros (unemployed) in Argentina, and the indigenous and Afro-American movements in Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru.

At the same time, while most traditional political parties lost power, new parties became so important that in two cases they gained the national presidency through elections: the PT (Worker's Party) in Brazil and the MAS (Movement Toward Socialism) in Bolivia. Although these parties have at their core a particular social sector (workers for the PT, and coca growers for MAS), they are socially heterogeneous and do not regard this core as a universal class. In both regional and national elections, they have come to power through multiclass alliances.

The new Leftist presidents, elected with the support of a variety of movements and organizations, represent a wide range of personalities, social origins, and political experiences. They have included three women (Michelle Bachelet, Cristina Fernández, Dilma Rousseff), an indigenous leader (Evo Morales), a trade-union organizer (Lula), a former priest (Lugo), and a lower-class and low-ranking military officer (Chávez).

Their conceptions of rule vary, from the attempt by Chávez to create a uniform society through the monological voice of the state to the heteroglossic project announced by José Mujica, the new president of Uruguay. The product of a divided society, Chávez has built on this division and turned it into a chasm between “*revolucionarios*” and “*escuálidos*” (“revolutionaries” and “squalids,” the term Chávez applies to the opposition). Since 2005, he has turned this division into a struggle to death between two systems: socialism and capitalism. His slogan for the revolution during this new phase is “*patria, socialismo o muerte*” (“fatherland, socialism, or death”).²

In contrast, Uruguay’s Mujica proclaimed in his inaugural speech the goal of “*una patria para todos y con todos*” (“fatherland for all and with all”), pointedly re-

2 It should be noted, however, that despite Chávez’s division of the population into two antagonistic groups, he conceives of the revolutionary camp as plural, made up of many social sectors, as long as they agree with the goals of the revolution as articulated by the state.

jecting his earlier radical position as a Tupamaro leader (Tupamaros were an urban guerrilla organization active in the 1960s and 1970s). The same emphasis on inclusion, plurality, and freedom was strongly expressed Dilma Rousseff during her inaugural speech in Brazil.

In different degrees, all regimes recognize now a plurality of agents of change. Given widespread exclusion from the formal economy, the exploitation of labor in factories or fields is no longer considered the main factor in the formation of revolutionary subjects. Alliances are now sought among subjects affected by multiple forms of exclusion and domination.

New political actors now participate and even define public debate in Latin America. For anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena, “what is unprecedented” in this turn to the Left is “the presence of regional indigenous social movements as a constituent element of these transformations;” for her, these processes entail “plural politics in a political pluriverse.”³

Pluralizing the agents of change, particularly when these include indigenous sectors, has expanded conceptions of historical progress and eroded the hegemony of liberal conceptions of the nation as either a monocultural mestizo community or a multicultural polity. Now the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia define these nations as plurinational polities, grants Rights to diverse com-

3 Marcelo Colussi, “El pobretariado: un nuevo sujeto revolucionario?”, *Revista Amauta*, 2009.

munities and proclaim and interculturality as national ideal. In the case of Ecuador, the 2008 constitution established for the first time anywhere in the world—as far as I know—the Rights of nature as a political actor.

These changes have expanded domain of the political, granting legitimacy to more diverse social agents, validity to different cosmological orders, and challenging anthropocentric ideological formations.

4. DOUBLE HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

It is common to think of double discourse in the political realm as involving duplicity and expressing a gap between claims and practices. Current Leftist politics in Latin America are certainly not exempt from this rather common form of deceptive political discourse. But what is distinctive now, in my view, is a peculiar modality of double discourse in which narratives about the present and the future produce accounts that are mutually contradictory but true, since they refer to different temporal horizons. Because it is constituted by the tension between the two temporal narratives of the short and long terms, I call this a “double historical discourse.”

By this term I seek to address not the sincerity of beliefs or their relation to practices but the structural relation that makes it possible for conflicting beliefs and practices to coexist without necessarily reflecting bad faith or deception because, in fact, they are framed within two different temporal scales: the short and the long terms.

In an insightful analysis of the current turn to the Left in Latin America, Atilio Borón notes a “disjunction” between the “consolidation of neoliberalism in the critical terrain of the economy and policy making” and its visible “weakening in the domains of culture, public awareness [*conciencia pública*] and politics.”⁴ He sees this disjunction as a reflection of the lack of an alternative economic program to neoliberalism. I would modify this acute observation by suggesting that neoliberalism’s “consolidation in the critical terrain of the economy” occurs mostly in the short term, because neoliberalism is also rejected for the future, at least rhetorically.

The perception that there is no immediate alternative to neoliberalism with respect to the economic core has led to the proliferation of this type of double historical discourse formed by narratives that contradict each other but are each true in terms of their respective historicities. The 2010 inaugural presidential speech of Uruguay’s José Mujica clearly expresses this temporal disjuncture: “We’ll be orthodox in macroeconomics. We’ll compensate this extensively by being heterodox, innovative and daring in other aspects.” In an earlier statement, he had asserted “we have many things to do

4 Atilio Borón, “Globalization: A Latin American Perspective,” *Estudos Sociedade e Agricultura*, n. 11, outubro, 1998.

before socialism” (“tenemos muchas cosas que hacer antes del socialismo”).⁵

Mujica was perhaps more candid than other Leftist presidents who also claim that capitalism is ultimately unviable but who seek to maximize income through capitalist production in the here and now. But even Bolivia’s vicepresident García Linera, a Marxist scholar who has published in the *New Left Review*, has stated that “Socialism” is a project for 100 or 200 years from now.

As a result, the present becomes particularly agitated and murky; it is a space of creative undertakings defined by different types of politics and orientations. It is also, needless to say, a space of typical forms of conventional double discourse, of multiple forms of duplicity and corruption.

In VEBo countries, where socialist ideals are constantly proclaimed, there is a sharp disjuncture between short and long terms, these discourses often undermine each other (Venezuela offers many examples). In BrAC countries, where socialist ideals are understated, the short terms seems more coherent, pushing the long term towards an ever less visible future (and this is particularly true of Brazil and Chile).

5 Daniel Chávez, “Del frente amplio a la nueva mayoría,” in *La nueva izquierda en América Latina: sus orígenes y trayectoria futura*, ed. César A. Rodríguez Garavito, Patrick S. Barrett, and Daniel Chávez, Bogotá, Grupo Editorial Norma, 2004, p. 172. Author’s translation.

5. RADICAL DEMOCRACY

The current struggles in Latin America build on the global achievements and limitations of both bourgeois and socialist democracies, but seek to go beyond them. For this reason, it would be a mistake to reduce this complex period to politics as usual, to the familiar. Politics now takes a range of forms in different locations. Its most significant achievement, in my view, has been the value now placed on democracy as a political form that requires constant expansion and transformation. As it has come to encompass ever-new areas of social life, democracy names now a process rather than a political shell or set of institutions. Boaventura de Santos has called this a “permanent democracy.” According to him, this notion of democracy has displaced “revolution” as the key term for the Left at this time.⁶ While this achievement is the result of many struggles, perhaps

6 This concept, “permanent democracy,” is borrowed by Juan Carlos Monedero from Boaventura de Sousa Santos in order to develop an argument about democracy as an ever-expanding and inclusive process (Juan Carlos Monedero, *El gobierno de las palabras: Política para tiempos de confusión*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2009, p. 221-75). Monedero’s work reflects his engagement with contemporary social theory as well as his recent experience in Venezuela as a key member of the Centro Miranda, a left think tank established under Chávez; he left this center after a rather unsuccessful attempt to develop constructive critiques of Chávez’s Bolivarian “revolution” from within.

its most innovative expression has been the recognition of difference as a political principle and as part democracy itself.

In many countries, particularly in VEBo nations, people now struggle for the recognition not only of citizens' equal Rights before the law but of different conceptions of citizenship and of the law. These demands are often cast from non-Western epistemological and cosmological positions and involve a critique not just of Western liberalism but also of Western modernity itself. As such, they involve the struggle not just over distinct sets of Rights but over the Right to have different conceptions of life. This has been the major contribution of the indigenous movements.

After a long century of homogenizing projects led by elites who endorsed Western notions of progress, these movements have helped redefine the national imaginary, incorporating, as I said earlier, values of indigenous communities and conceptualizing the nation as plurinational community, as sanctioned in the new constitutions in Bolivia and Ecuador, or recognizing the Rights of nature, as in the 2008 constitution of Ecuador—in effect, making a move from anthropocentrism to biocentrism and thus radicalizing the critique of Eurocentrism. This move from anthropocentrism to bioecentrism has now become part of a collective struggles.

These struggles have expanded the agents, agendas, and conceptions of democracy. The struggle *for* democracy

now entails a struggle *about* democracy. As Boaventura de Santos has phrased it, political battles now pursue not an alternative to democracy but an alternative democracy.⁷

I will conclude this paper about imagined futures with some thoughts about the future of the real future.

Latin America's crisis of futurity involves yet a more fundamental challenge. It is not just that the Left's imagined future is uncertain but that its real future existence is in question. This turn to the Left already may turn out to be only temporary—a passing moment rather than a permanent achievement. At least at the level of the national state, the region shows signs of shifting toward the Right.

A sign of this shift is the victory of billionaire Sebastian Piñera in Chile in 2010, despite Michelle Bachelet's 84% popularity. Even Fidel Castro, certainly an astute observer and one prone not to offer negative forecasts, has stated that “before Obama completes his term there will be from six to eight Right-wing governments in Latin America that will be allies of the empire.”⁸

7 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Una izquierda con futuro,” in *La nueva izquierda en América Latina: sus orígenes y trayectoria futura*, ed. César A. Rodríguez Garavito, Patrick S. Barrett, and Daniel Chávez, Bogotá, Grupo Editorial Norma, 2004, p. 437-57.

8 Fidel Castro, “Reflections by Fidel Castro: [Obama] A Science Fiction Story,” Caricom News Network, November 13, 2009, http://csmenetwork.com/2/index.php?option=com_content&v

A more significant sign is of this possible shift to the Right is the weight of the short term in this tension between past and future. This weight of the present may give rise to a perverse paradox. Given the location of Latin America in the twin international division of labor and of nature, at the present time the pursuit of foreign exchange in the present has meant that, in practice, all Latin America states—whether on the Right or the Left—promote comparative advantages within a neoliberal framework. Since the main comparative advantage of Latin America now is its vast natural resources, the maximization of foreign exchange places all Latin American states on the same economic plane—one of dependence on primary products. If this analysis is correct, in a perverse twist of fate, in pursuit of fortune, Leftist states may be doing now the work of capital. Ollanta Humala's siding now with Lula's economic model rather than with Chávez's may be another indication of the changing times.

On the other hand—or perhaps in this case in the same hand, as Right and Left get fused or blurred—even if the Right may achieve electoral victories in the near future, my sense is that the Left has managed to redefine the terrain on which all political sectors must now move. In Latin America, as in Europe, opponents of the Left now frequently endorse many of the Left's principles, policies and aims. While some of these are realizable under

any political regimes, the most radical remain ideals the Left's exclusive goals.

Some of these radical ideals may seem utopian or unrealistic at this time, yet they express hopes and desires that affect the unfolding of current politics. As moderate a thinker as Max Weber recognized utopian strivings as indispensable in political life. As he said, "It is perfectly true, and confirmed by all historical experience, that the possible cannot be achieved without continually reaching out towards that which is impossible in this world."⁹

Recently, from a rather different position, philosopher Alain Badiou has argued for the need to reach for what seems impossible. Given that capitalism is globally unviable since it excludes majorities, degrades communal life, and erodes the natural habitat of humanity, fighting for an alternative world is absolutely indispensable for this reason he has proposed what he calls "the communist hypothesis" and has based this hypothesis on both an abstract, Kantian regulative principle as well as on concrete historical experiences that generate or prefigure communist ideals. Slavoj Žižek enthusiastically endorses Badiou's communist hypothesis but restricts its foundation to historical, not philosophical sources.

9 Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 225.

These historical sources may be redemptive ideals from the past. I have argued that the Left's appeal to icons from the past is a symptom that reveals anxiety over an uncertain future. Yet, the appeal to past icons may also express their lasting significance for ongoing struggles. It is in this sense that Bolivian and Michigan lucid scholar Javier Sanjinés has coined the notion of "embers of the past" to evoke the past's capacity to energize present struggles and ignite new conflagrations.¹⁰

Sanjinés's "embers" are similar to Walter Benjamin's traditions of the oppressed. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, Benjamin's conception of the dialectic involves not just the two familiar moments of negation and supercession but also the neglected notion of "saving"—saving the past for the present. And while Marx was bent on moving forward and called for a poetry of the future to inspire current struggles, he also recognized the value of past ideals. For him, the past might be awakened and bring life to the present if it was invoked to animate struggles to transform the world rather than to adorn its dramas. As he famously argued, while the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century "awakened the dead" for "glorifying new struggles" and "magnifying the task in reality," the social revolutions

10 Javier Sanjinés, personal communication, May 1, 2010.

of the nineteenth century did so for “parodying the old” and for “fleeing from its [the task’s] solution in reality.”¹¹

Carried along by winds of history that fan old flames and ignite new struggles, the American continent has become a fabric of diverse collective utopian dreams. As a result of all these recent political changes and movements, the struggle for democracy is now deeper in Latin America, making it possible to recognize the need to respect not just all peoples in the planet, but the planet itself, and thus to value different kinds of human beings as well as different kinds of beings—and to recognize that one does not dream the same in Spanish or in Aymara, as a woman or as a man, as an adult or as a child, from a bed or from under the bridge.

Of course, given the unequal structures of power within which this Leftward turn has taken place, it is possible that its new imaginaries may be co-opted or crushed. But given that these imaginaries now unite South and North in a politics that fuses the pursuit of well-being for all and sheer planetary survival, it is likely that a counterpoint between embers of the past and poetry of the future will continue to conjure up images of worlds free from the horrors of history.

Politics will remain a battle of desires waged on an uneven terrain. But as long as people find themselves

11 Xavier Albó, “Prólogo,” in *Rescaldos del pasado: Conflictos culturales en sociedades postcoloniales*, by Javier Sanjinés, La Paz: PIEB, 2009, p. xiii. Author’s translation.

without a safe and dignified home in the world, utopian dreams will continue to proliferate and energize struggles to build a world that may contain many worlds, a world in which people could dream their future without fear of waking up.