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*Distinguishing Features of
Latin America's New Left:
The Chávez, Morales and Correa
Governments*

Most political analysts place the governments of Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), and Rafael Correa (Ecuador) in the same category but without identifying their common characteristics. Since the publication of Castañeda and Morales's *Leftovers* (2008), critics of the left have sought to overcome this shortcoming by characterizing the three presidents as “populist leftists” as opposed to “good leftists” such as Brazil's Luiz Inácio (Lula) da Silva.¹ According to Castañeda and Morales, the salient features of the populist left are a radical discourse devoid of ideological substance, disrespect for democratic institutions, pronounced authoritarian tendencies, and vituperation against the United States that is designed to pay political dividends at the expense of their nations' economic interests.

At the other end of the political spectrum, the longtime political analyst and activist Marta Harnecker has proclaimed the emergence of a “new left” in Latin America represented by these three leaders.

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Harnecker associates the new left with the “twenty first-century socialism” embraced by the three presidents, while recognizing that both concepts are vague and will be defined over time, largely through practice.² Another expression of the common thrust of the three governments was the call by President Chávez in late 2009 for the formation of a “Fifth International” that would constitute a new international movement in favour of radical change. The proposal sought to analyse and apply the novel experiences of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, as well as other occurrences, in an effort to break with the traditions stemming from the previous four socialist internationals.

These developments make clear the need to go beyond the rhetoric of many of the left’s detractors and defenders and to examine the wide range of similarities in order to determine just how new the new left is. One common feature of all three governments is the election of a constituent assembly at the outset of each presidency. All three governments came to power with an absolute majority of votes and counted on congressional majorities, advantages that facilitated a democratic approach to far-reaching change. Other common characteristics include an emphasis on social participation and incorporation over considerations of economic productivity, modifications of the Marxist notion of class, diversification of economic relations, preference for radical democracy over liberal democracy, and the celebration of national symbols.

This article’s focus on a common model helps distinguish the three experiences from other ideologies and governments on the left in Latin America. The analysis of novel features and approaches also helps explain the reservations and critical stands of traditional leftist organizations such as Communist parties and Trotskyist groups in the three nations. Finally, in spite of the close relations among the three governments and Cuba and predictions that they will eventually replicate the Cuban model, the article sheds light on fundamental differences between the paths to socialism followed in two distinct international settings, cold-war and post-cold-war.

THE RADICAL DEMOCRACY MODEL

The political model embraced by the three governments represents a thorough break with the socialism of the past. One distinctive

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characteristic is the frequency of electoral contests, including party primaries, recall elections, and national referendums, which have been marked by high levels of voter turnout. The left in power has generally emerged triumphant, sometimes by margins without precedent in the nation's history. In April 1999, for example, 88 percent of Venezuelan voters ratified the government-sponsored referendum in favour of a constituent assembly. Venezuelans re-elected Chávez for the second time in December 2007 with 63 percent, the highest for any presidential candidate in the nation's modern democratic period. Similarly, Morales received 64 percent of the vote in his bid for re-election in December 2009 at the same time that his supporters garnered an unprecedented two-thirds majority in both houses of congress. Chávez and Morales also emerged victorious in recall elections with 58 and 67 percent of the vote respectively. Finally, in all three nations an overwhelming majority of voters approved new constitutions opposed by leading government adversaries.

These sizable majorities have provided the three governments with more options for carrying out radical reform than were available to leftist presidents such as Salvador Allende, who reached power in 1970 with 36 percent of the vote, and the Sandinista Daniel Ortega, who returned to the presidency in 2006 with 38 percent. Nevertheless, given the acute political tensions and extreme polarization in all three countries, the strategy of holding frequent elections as a means to affirm legitimacy has been risky, since any defeat would provide a platform for an intransigent opposition.

Another characteristic of political life in the three nations is the avoidance of intense repression, although the opposition has accused the governments of laying the foundations for dictatorial rule. Party competition in the context of the acute political conflict that characterizes the three countries contrasts with the traditionally low level of tolerance on the part of fragile Third World democracies for "disloyal oppositions". As a whole, government opponents in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador represent a "disloyal opposition" which by definition questions the legitimacy of those in power.

By refusing to support virtually any government initiative and accusing it of authoritarianism, they seek to delegitimize the government. Moreover, at certain key junctures, important sectors of the opposition have been implicated in violent actions that other anti-government organizations have failed to repudiate at the time. In the

case of Venezuela, opposition leaders in 2004 openly advocated urban *foquista* actions that sought to create conditions of ungovernability. In Bolivia paramilitary groups tied to various governors attacked pro-government mobilizations in 2008, blew up gas pipelines to Brazil, and destroyed government offices in the eastern lowland region.

Another distinguishing political feature of the three governments is their defense of radical democracy in the tradition of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and rejection of many of the basic precepts of liberal democracy. Radical democracy emphasizes social incorporation and direct participation. In contrast, liberal democracy, with its central concern for the rights and prerogatives of minorities (which is often synonymous with “elites”), places a premium on the system of checks and balances and the diffusion of authority. The coexistence of these two distinct paradigms has contributed to intense polarization.

The differences between the two approaches have manifested themselves in concrete ways. In the first place, radical democracy champions the principle of majority rule, in which decision making on all matters requires 50 percent of the vote plus one. In contrast, the concern for minority rights of advocates of liberal democracy leads them to insist on consensus among the governing parties and the opposition on important decisions. Indeed, the opposition in all three countries has praised the “pacted” democracy that in Venezuela and Bolivia prevailed under the old regime.

In addition, the defenders of liberal democracy often demand significantly more than a simple majority for the approval of legislation. The clash between the two concepts occurred at the constituent assembly in Bolivia in 2006, when the opposition demanded that the vote of two-thirds of the delegates be required for approval of each article of the constitution as well as the final document. After seven months of resistance to the notion of providing the “minority” with a “veto,” Morales’s *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement toward Socialism—MAS) accepted the two-thirds arrangement.

Nevertheless, the MAS’s position on the matter led it to take advantage of a temporary boycott of the assembly by the two main opposition parties to ratify the constitution in December 2007 with the support of a simple majority of the delegates, who represented two-thirds of those in attendance that day. Former President Jorge Quiroga, who headed the main opposition party, called the move “a

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national disgrace” at the same time that violence broke out throughout the nation.

In Ecuador, Correa insisted that a simple majority of the delegates to the constituent assembly be sufficient to approve articles rather than a two-thirds majority, a requirement that he claimed would have obstructed meaningful change. Similarly, the Venezuelan opposition harshly criticized the Chávez-dominated National Assembly for stipulating that appointment of Supreme Court judges require the approval of a simple majority of the chamber’s deputies rather than two-thirds.

The system of referendums and recall elections incorporated into the constitutions of all three countries is also in line with the concept of majority rule, which is a basic component of radical democracy. In Bolivia and Venezuela the recall has proved to be an effective mechanism for dealing with crises by moving the locus of political confrontation from the streets to the electoral arena. In Venezuela, the presidential recall election in August 2004 served to defuse tensions dating back to the 2002 coup and ushered in several years of relative stability. In Bolivia, Morales appealed to voting majorities in the face of insurgency by holding recall elections in August 2008 for the national executive and the nation’s governorships, some of which had been promoting violence.

The opposition in all three countries, as well as many political analysts, has called the referendums examples of “plebiscitary democracy”. According to this model, the national executive frames issues in accordance with its own agenda without input from the opposition and the public is presented with an “all-or-nothing” proposition. Government adversaries in Venezuela, for instance, lashed out at Chávez’s proposed constitutional reform for being procedurally flawed. They argued that most of its 69 articles should have been incorporated into legislation to be considered by the national assembly on an individual basis rather than voted on as part of a package in a national referendum. In Ecuador, both the opposition and some political analysts accused Correa of promoting “plebiscitary democracy” on the ground that he presented the referendum on the nation’s new constitution in April 2007 as a vote of confidence in his government and threatened to “go home” if he lost.

In the second place, popular mobilization and participation on a

mass scale and an ongoing basis (viewed with suspicion by defenders of liberal democracy) are basic features of radical democracy and have proved essential for the political survival of all three presidents. Social movement protests paved the way for the rise to power of Morales and Correa (as well as Néstor Kirchner in the case of Argentina). The endorsement of Correa by the powerful *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* and other social movements sealed his triumph in the second round of the presidential election of 2006. In Venezuela, the rallying of massive numbers of poor people on April 13, 2002, made possible Chávez's return to power after his ouster two days before.

In both Venezuela and Bolivia the mobilization of government supporters was designed to guarantee order in the face of opposition insurgency. Thus, for instance, the concentration of Chavistas in downtown Caracas on the day of the April 2002 coup was intended to serve as a buffer between violent members of the opposition and the presidential palace, and during the two-month general strike beginning in December brigades consisting of members of surrounding communities protected oil installations. In Bolivia, peasants and miners converged on the city of Sucre to ensure the personal safety of constituent assembly delegates, who faced threats from paramilitary units before the final vote on the new constitution. Finally, on September 30, 2010, thousands of Ecuadorians took to the streets and deterred the possible deployment of military forces in support of coup rebels who had virtually kidnapped President Correa.

In the third place, Chávez, Morales, and Correa are charismatic leaders whose governments have strengthened the executive branch at the expense of corporatist institutions and the checks and balances that underpinned liberal democracy in the past. Furthermore, the three governments favour the incorporation and direct participation of the non-privileged over corporatist mechanisms and political party prerogatives and in doing so have broken with long-standing practices, accepted by some leftist parties, which facilitated elite input in decision making. Along these lines, the governing leaders in all three countries reject the Leninist party structure and instead favour, in the words of Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linera, "a more flexible and fluid model".³

Finally, the governing political parties lack the influence, strength,

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and independence to serve as checks on executive authority. Thus, for instance, the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela is largely controlled by cabinet ministers at the regional level and by Chavista governors and mayors at the local level. Correa's political organization, the Alianza País, founded by about a dozen groups shortly prior to his election in 2006, is too heterogeneous to wield significant power.

Some government supporters justify the preponderant role of the national executive by claiming that the president maintains a "dialectic" exchange with the general population in which he formulates positions and then modifies them after receiving feedback from below. The opposition has responded to the centralization of power by raising the banner of decentralization and (in the case of Bolivia's eastern lowland departments and in the state of Guayas in Ecuador) territorial autonomy.

The political model that has emerged in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador is unique in fundamental ways that clearly differentiate it from both communist nations and social democratic ones. On the one hand, the electoral democracy and party competition that prevail in the three nations are the antithesis of the closed political system of "really existing socialism." In addition, in contrast to the situation in the Soviet Union and China, none of the three had any close-knit vanguard party in the Leninist tradition (or powerful political party of any type) that played a central role both before and after reaching power.

At the same time, the confrontational discourse of the leftists in power, the intensity of political conflict, and the acute social and political polarization and steady radicalization have no equivalents among nations in Europe and Africa governed by parties committed to democratic socialism. Finally, popular participation in social programs and political mobilization in favour of the governing leadership in such massive numbers and over such an extended period of time have rarely been matched in other Latin American nations.

The emerging hybrid model, combining dimensions of radical democracy and the representative democracy inherited from the past, is also in many ways *sui generis*. Features associated with radical democracy include referendums, party primaries, frequent elections, numerous public works projects undertaken by community councils,

an active role for social movements in the political life of the nation, a strong national executive, and an official discourse exalting direct participation and attacking the representative democracy of the past. Nevertheless, the old system and structures have not been dismantled. Even though in Venezuela the spectre of community councils' displacing the elected municipal government has been raised, representative institutions at all levels have been left largely intact in the three nations.

THE PROCESS OF RADICALIZATION

The electoral platforms of Chávez, Morales, and Correa in their first successful bids for the presidency deemphasized far-reaching socioeconomic transformation and focused on more moderate goals. Their principal campaign offer was the convening of a constituent assembly in order to "refound" the nation's democracy on the basis of popular participation.

During his campaign in 1998, for instance, Chávez calmed fears regarding a possible unilateral moratorium on the foreign debt by calling for a negotiated solution. In the period prior to his election in 2005, Morales toned down the radical demands on coca cultivation and hydrocarbon nationalization that had been formulated by the social movements of the 1990s from which the MAS emerged as he reached out beyond his regional base of northern Cochabamba. Prior to embracing "communitarian socialism," President Morales and Vice President García Linera defended "Andean capitalism," which was to prevail for a century. Correa, for his part, in 2006 criticized human rights violations in Colombia but pledged to capture the FARC guerrillas and turn them over to the Colombian authorities, denied that he was part of Chávez's Bolivarian movement even though he was a friend of the Venezuelan president, and criticized the dollarization of the Ecuadorian economy while claiming that changing the system was infeasible.

The three presidencies have been characterized by gradual but steady radicalization unencumbered by the concessions associated with the consensus politics and liberal democracy of previous years. All three have parlayed the widespread popular support for their initial constitutional proposals into consolidation of power and

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political and economic renovation. In general, they have taken advantage of the momentum created by each political victory to introduce reforms designed to deepen the process of change. They have also interpreted their electoral triumphs as popular man-dates in favour of socialism.

In Venezuela, Chávez's decrees of land reform and state control of mixed companies in the oil industry in 2001, his redefinition of private property in 2005, and his expropriation of companies in strategic sectors in 2007 and 2008 set the stage for more radical steps. In a surprisingly confrontational move just months after taking office, Morales ordered troops to take over 56 natural gas installations and the nation's two major oil refineries in order to pressure foreign companies to accept new nationalistic legislation. In the months after his election, Correa radicalized his position on the proposed constituent assembly by insisting that it had the right to dissolve congress, thus placing himself on a collision course with the congressional majority that represented the traditional political elite. The dynamic of initial moderation followed by a gradual deepening process differed from that of the Soviet Union and China, where communist parties came to power with explicit far-reaching structural goals stemming from Marxist ideology, and Cuba, where radicalization occurred at a more accelerated pace during the first three years of the revolution.

The governing left has raised the banner of anti-neoliberalism and was thus in an advantageous position vis-à-vis the opposition to its right, which has lacked a well-defined program to dispel fears that its assumption of power would signify a return to the past. A major issue of differentiation between the government and its adversaries to its right is privatization. While the leftists in power affirmed their anti-neoliberal credentials by largely halting and reversing privatization schemes, the major parties of the opposition took ambiguous positions or no position at all on the matter.

Political polarization, in which all parties to the right of the government converged in criticizing virtually all of its actions, ruled out critical support for nationalist measures from a centre-left perspective and in so doing hurt the opposition, which forfeited space on the left end of the political spectrum. In Venezuela, for instance, former leftist parties such as the Movimiento al Socialismo, Causa R,

and Podemos abandoned any semblance of an independent line within the anti-Chavista bloc as they blended in with the rest of the opposition. Similarly, in Ecuador the social democratic Izquierda Democrática (ID), which had supported Correa in the second round of the 2006 elections, assumed a position of intransigent opposition by his second term in office.

At the same time, the gradual approach to socialism pursued by all three governments has drawn harsh criticism from political actors to their left who consider the state “bourgeois” and favour a complete break with the past. The clash between the three leftist governments and their leftist critics has also defined the specificity of the emerging new left in power. The defenders of the three governments envision a gradual transformation of the state in accordance with Gramsci’s “war of position” based on the left’s incremental occupation of spaces in the public sphere. According to this strategy, the left takes advantage of the presence of its activists in public administration and of the state’s own internal contradictions. In contrast, orthodox Marxists such as the Trotskyists invoke Lenin’s dictum regarding the need to “smash the state” at the same time that they advocate blanket expropriation of banking, large agricultural estates, and monopoly industry. In addition, Communists and other traditional leftists criticize the term “twenty-first-century socialism” for belittling the struggles led by leftists over the previous century.

Some critics located to the left of all three governments come out of an anarchist tradition. They posit that the “constituent power”, consisting of autonomous social movements and the rank and file in general, inevitably confronts the “constituted power”, made up of the state bureaucracy in its entirety and the “political class” and call for a “revolution within the revolution” in order to root out bureaucratic privileges. This position finds expression in the indigenous-based movements in Bolivia and Ecuador, which defend the autonomy of their communities and have resisted Morales’s and Correa’s efforts to promote large-scale mining activity that threatens to devastate the areas where their members reside. Some of the movements have embraced an “identity politics” that is at odds with the electoral strategy followed by the leftists in power. Among the indigenous leaders critical of the government on a wide range of issues including cultural identity was Bolivian presidential candidate Felipe Quispe,

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who fervently opposed Morales's limitations on coca production and advocated complete nationalization of the hydrocarbon industry.

When they are placed alongside the orthodox Marxist, neo-anarchist, and new-social-movement currents on the left, the unique and heterodox character of the three presidents and their closest supporters becomes evident. They recognize that "bureaucrats" who put the brakes on change are well represented in the state sphere but stop short of initiating an all-out purge and upheaval along the lines of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, as is advocated by political actors to their left. Furthermore, they promote the creation of a broad-based, highly diversified movement, place a premium on unity among supporters, and defend vertical as well as horizontal decision making.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

The strategy pursued by all three governments in favour of a "multipolar world" resembles in some ways and contrasts in others with the foreign policies of governments committed to socialism in the twentieth century. The "multipolar world" was originally invoked by Chávez at the outset of his presidency as a euphemism for anti-imperialism and opposition to U.S. hegemony. The concept refers to the strengthening of different blocs of nations to defend shared interests such as the OPEC in the case of Venezuela and Ecuador and UNASUR (South American nations' grouping), of which Correa became president shortly after its founding in 2009. The strategy of unity in spite of diversity recalls the Non-Aligned Movement headed by Tito, Nehru, Nasser and Nkrumah in the early 1960s, which sought to go beyond ethnic, religious, and political differences in order to unite the nations of the South around common objectives and demands.

In essence, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador have followed a dual approach of uniting among themselves in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) at the same time that they have played active and leading roles in promoting broader continental unity. In this sense, their strategy is comparable to the cold war foreign policy of the Soviet Union, which distinguished between its closest allies, committed to communism, and Third World governments of "national liberation," which it considered nationalistic and anti-

imperialist. Similarly, the presidents of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador declare themselves anti-capitalist and have often clashed with Washington but also act in unison with moderate governments such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

Nevertheless, the situation in the initial years of the twenty-first century contrasts with the highly polarized setting of the cold war and is conducive to a greater degree of autonomy for Latin American nations vis-à-vis the United States. Thus, in contrast with Cuba in the 1960s, the “radical” Latin American nations have been able to cement close ties with the “moderates”. Whereas Chávez courts the heads of state of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, Cuba promoted guerrilla war-fare throughout the continent and in doing so forfeited the possibility of winning over or neutralizing moderate presidents such as Arturo Frondizi of Argentina.

Latin America was never united during the past century to the degree that it has been in the recent past. Moderate governments have acted firmly to avoid the destabilization and isolation of the countries run by radicals. The governments of Brazil and Argentina, for instance, helped mediate an end to the acute conflict generated by Morales’s “nationalization” of the hydrocarbon industry in 2006, even though their economic interests were at stake. Subsequently, all 12 UNASUR members signed the Moneda Declaration, which blocked possible plans to topple the Morales governments in Bolivia in 2008, and two years later played a similar role in the face of an attempted coup in Ecuador.

Furthermore, the positions of the radicals have been complementary rather than antithetical to those of the moderates. Thus, for example, for the first year and a half following the Honduran coup of June 2009, UNASUR’s moderates and radicals blocked the new government’s readmission into the Organization of American States. While the moderates placed conditions on entrance, the radicals questioned the very legitimacy of the new government. Finally, Latin American unity has brought the radical and moderate presidents together with centrist ones around common pursuits such as the creation of UNASUR and its broader-based successor the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

The discourse and content of the foreign policies of all three presidents are shaped by the imperatives of globalization. They are

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also free of the goals of absolute self-sufficiency and autarky that characterized Maoism half a century ago. Programs like ALBA and Petrocaribe (which offers Venezuelan oil to Caribbean and Central American nations on special terms) are justified along these lines. Furthermore, globalization has created constraints that influence international policy, the fiery nationalistic rhetoric of all three presidents notwithstanding. Chávez, for instance, has refrained from defaulting on foreign loan payments or withdrawing from the International Monetary Fund, while Morales has tried to maintain access to U.S. markets. The thrust of these strategies, policies, and discourses is at odds with the “socialism in one country” thesis defended by the Soviet leadership under Stalin.

DISCOURSE AND POLITICAL VISION

Since 2005, Venezuelan, Bolivian, and Ecuadorian leaders have espoused support for an alternative to capitalism embodied in the general concept of socialism for the twenty-first century. Following the ratification of Bolivia’s new constitution in January 2009, Morales proclaimed the birth of a “communitarian socialism” underpinned by the regional autonomy promoted by the new document. Morales, Chávez, and Correa have proposed adapting socialism to the concrete reality of Latin America at a time when the conventional wisdom in the West is that this model is all but dead.

In sharp contrast to the socialist trajectory of Cuba after 1959, the political process in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela is unfolding in the context of a bourgeois democratic society in which capitalist relations of production are still the dominant mode of economic activity. Bolivia’s Vice President García Linera, for instance, has stated that socialism does not preclude the existence of a market economy and favours dialogue with those who do not share the MAS’s long-term structural goals, while Chávez has called for a “strategic alliance” with the business sector. In effect, Venezuela’s mixed economy consists of state companies that compete with but are not designed to replace private ones in certain key sectors as a means to avoid inflation and scarcity of basic commodities. Finally, the economies of all three nations rest in large part on the export of extractive commodities to U.S. markets.

Along similar lines, cultural and social transformation has failed

to keep pace with radical political change. Venezuela, for example, remains a highly consumer-oriented society in which values of capitalist society such as conspicuous consumption, individualism, and the primacy of private property are still highly valued. Furthermore, the conservative opposition in all three countries relies on a full array of allies including the private media, the Catholic Church, and the ever-present United States. In short, in contrast to those in the Soviet Union after 1917, China after 1949, and Cuba after 1959, efforts to promote socialism for the twenty-first century occur in the highly contested arena of capitalist society, in which most traditional values and institutions, though weakened, are nonetheless present.

Twenty-first century socialism is born of a reappraisal of past leftist strategies based on long-held assumptions and an acknowledgment of the mistakes of previous efforts at socialist construction in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. The new perspective rejects the purported role of a vanguard party and the dogmatic application of theory with little or no application to Latin American social reality. It also questions the pre-eminent role attributed to the working class to the exclusion of broad segments of the population including the urban poor, the informal sector, religious communities, the indigenous, the Afro-descendent, and women.

The rejection of working class vanguardism has created the political space for working closely with other groups and political forces that advocate change. In the case of Bolivia, a central aspect of this approach, as García Linera states, is the “project of self-representation of the social movements of plebeian society”. The strategy is particularly relevant in Bolivia and Ecuador, where political organizations on the left and the right have historically manipulated indigenous organizations to promote their own political programs. In an interview with the German Marxist Heinz Dieterich, Morales assessed past asymmetrical power relations between workers’ organizations grouped in the Bolivian Workers’ Central (COB) and the indigenous population by pointing out that COB leaders “always said in their congresses that the Indians would carry the workers to power on our shoulders. We were the builders of the revolution and they were the masters of the revolution. Now things have changed and intellectuals and workers are joining us”.⁴

In contrast to capitalism’s emphasis on the individual, twenty-

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first century socialism has a strong moral and ethical component that promotes social well-being, fraternity, and social solidarity. The model draws inspiration from Catholic and even Protestant theology of liberation. Indeed, most of its leaders still profess a religious faith. In an interview conducted by the British scholar Helen Yaffe, Correa pointed to the compatibility between theology of liberation and socialism and added: “Twenty-first century socialism...can be joined by both atheists and practicing Catholics — because I am a practicing Catholic. It does not contradict my faith, which, on the contrary, reinforces the search for social justice”.⁵

Twenty-first century socialism draws inspiration from the history, political practices, and socio-cultural experiences of Latin America. As did the radical populism of the past, twenty-first century socialism celebrates the popular will as personified by historical symbols to a greater extent than traditional leftist and social democratic parties, which have tended to be more selective and inclined to rely on imported slogans. Chávez and the Chavistas, for instance, are willing to overlook the contradictions of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth century caudillos such as Cipriano Castro in order to glorify them and emphasize their nationalist behaviour, much as the Peronistas reinterpreted Juan Manuel Rosas and Juan Facundo Quiroga.

Leaders in all three nations have created a new narrative of nationhood that challenges long-held assumptions and previous representations of culture, history, race, gender, citizenship, and identity. Thus, the new political movements offer an alternative reading of the past that challenges the conventional wisdom that legitimized the old order. This dynamic process links contemporary social movements and political forces to a tradition of political and social struggle. Re-envisioning the past serves to incorporate previously marginalized peoples, including the indigenous, the Afro-descendent, peasants, women, and workers who historically struggled to change social conditions in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. The indigenous movements in Bolivia see themselves as inheritors of the mass movements led by Tupac Katari and Tupac Amaru against Spanish colonial authorities. By forging connections between past and current struggles, these movements build on a legacy of resistance previously excluded from the official historical record. The process,

which is described among Bolivia's Aymara as "walking ahead while looking back", incorporates historically marginalized voices and creates a sense of empowerment among those contemporary forces engaged in the process of social change.

The intellectual tenets of twenty-first century socialism can be found in the works of the Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui, which are frequently cited by Chávez and other pro-government leaders in the three nations. Mariátegui proposed an Indo-American socialism adapted to the social and political reality of the continent. While pointing to the importance of the working class, he called for the incorporation of indigenous and rural communities as part of the broader class and national struggle. Along these lines, he argued that the indigenous heritage of collectivism dating back prior to the Spanish conquest would facilitate socialist construction under a revolutionary government. He also recognized the interrelation between race and class in an economic system inherited from the colonial experience and the importance of creating a broad front with which to confront the forces of capital.⁶

In all three countries there is also an effort under way to incorporate women, traditionally overlooked by male-dominated historical accounts. As a result, women's role in the independence process, their contributions to the social and political struggles of the nineteenth century, and their participation in the labour and political struggles of the twentieth century have been high-lighted. In Ecuador, as part of a process dating back several decades, the independence leader Manuela Sáenz has undergone a reassessment and emerged as an important figure in her own right and not simply for her relations with Simón Bolívar. Her contributions to the South American independence movements, including her courageous actions at the Battles of Pichincha and Ayacucho, where she acquired the rank of colonel, have earned her the admiration of various social movements. Similarly, Bartolina Sisa, who led an indigenous rebellion in La Paz in 1781 that served as inspiration for the establishment in 1983 of the International Day of Indigenous Women celebrated on September 5, has in the twenty-first century become even more revered. The cases of Sáenz and Sisa, one *criolla* (Spanish descent) and the other indigenous, symbolize the incorporation of large numbers of women in the social struggles taking place in the region.

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In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez and his followers have called into question the traditional representations of Venezuelan history and its most dominant figure, Simón Bolívar. The new political discourse has created a space in which scholars and others have celebrated the role of criollo elites such as Francisco Miranda, Andres Bello, and Simón Rodríguez while giving increased emphasis to others who asserted equality of the races. Among the latter are “el Negro” Miguel, who led a rebellion in Buría in the state of Lara, the Afro-Venezuelans Juan Andrés López del Rosario (Andresote) and José Leonardo Chirinos, who headed uprisings against the Spanish in 1730 and 1795 respectively, and Manuel Gual and José España, who conspired against Spain in 1797. Bolívar’s views are now a source of public discussion concerning the past and present course of Venezuelan politics and society. His divergent opinions on democracy, race, international relations, social conditions, and public policy serve to bolster positions taken by both the government and the opposition.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS

The social and economic conditions that paved the way for the left’s assumption of power in the three countries did not accord with the orthodox Marxist vision of a socialist revolution. In contrast to what Marxist theory predicts, the organized working class did not constitute the vanguard or the major driving social force in the confrontations leading up to the left’s accession to power. Non-proletarian underprivileged classes played leading roles and belonged to powerful social movements in the case of Bolivia and Ecuador, while in Venezuela they participated in the disruptions that shook the nation in February 1989.⁷ In urban areas, they included workers in the informal economy and unorganized ones employed by small firms in the formal economy. These sectors were “marginalized” and “semi-marginalized” in that the political and cultural elite had long ignored them and they lacked representation at the national level as well as the benefits of collective bargaining agreements and effective labour legislation. The social upheavals in the years prior to the left’s initial electoral triumphs help explain the more radical course of events in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador as compared with Brazil and Uruguay under moderate governments.

Neoliberal policies and globalization-induced structural changes in the 1980s and 1990s fuelled the growth of the informal economy and weakened the labour movement, whose struggles in the workplace were overshadowed by social movement activism and mass disturbances. The Bolivian mining workers' federation and the COB, with a long history of independent, militant unionism largely unmatched in the continent, were weakened by the phasing out of state-controlled enterprises and the atomization of the labour force under neoliberal governments beginning in the mid-1980s. In Venezuela, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela* not only endorsed neoliberal-inspired labour legislation in 1997 but helped draft it and then went on to organize general strikes from 2001 to 2003 in conjunction with the nation's main business organization in an attempt to oust President Chávez.

Chávez reacted to organized labour's submissiveness and resistance to change by questioning the Marxist insistence on working-class primacy in the revolutionary process (although more recently he has modified his position). Theoreticians of twenty-first century socialism flatly reject orthodox Marxism's cult of the proletariat, "a privileging whereby all other workers (including those in the growing informal sector) are seen as lesser...unproductive workers, indeed lumpenproletariat".⁸ The three governments both in policy and discourse emphasize incorporation of marginalized and semi-marginalized sectors of the population in decision making and the cultural life of the nation and their eligibility for the benefits accorded to workers of the formal economy. This orientation contrasts with traditional Marxism's special appeal to the proletariat, whose salient characteristics were hardly that of an "excluded" sector. Not only was the proletariat part of the economic system but it was generally represented by a trade union structure. The goal of incorporation of the marginalized and semi-marginalized sectors, to a large extent lacking in organizational experience and discipline, was in many ways more challenging than that of advancing the interests of the organized working class.

The social makeup of the ruling bloc in the three nations is diverse, complex, and characterized by internal tensions. This pattern is contrary to Marx's prediction, which has influenced orthodox Marxist movements over the years, of industry-driven polarization pitting an

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increasingly large, concentrated, and powerful proletariat against the bourgeoisie. According to the traditional Marxist vision of polarization, nonproletarian, non-privileged social sectors eventually become virtually extinct or else form an alliance with the proletariat without creating sharp internal conflicts over distinct priorities or interests. The profundity of the fissures in the leftist bloc in the three nations also calls into question the concept of the “multitude,” which takes for granted the unity and convergence of the social groups and sectors critical of the established order.⁹

Social heterogeneity and conflicting interests are particularly evident in the case of Bolivia. It was easier for the left to maintain the unity and support of the indigenous movements, peasant unions, labour unions, and the *cocalero* (coca growers) movement in the water war of 2000 and the gas war of 2003, which shook the nation, than it has been for the Morales government since 2006. In spite of similar roots, indigenous groups and unionized peasants have clashed as a result of adherence to distinct paradigms. While the former defend the sacredness of indigenous self-government and traditions, including in some cases the prohibition of property inheritance, the latter come out of the tradition of the 1952 revolution favouring individual property ownership. Indeed, the peasant unions criticize Morales’s land distribution program for its bias in favour of the communal property rights of indigenous groups, which they claim constitute the “new *hacendados*” of the Bolivian East. In reality, however, the indigenous communitarian ideal (known as the *ayllu*) often clashes with the self-interest of indigenous community members, thus providing evidence of the complexity of the contradictions within the governing movement in Bolivia. A comparable situation of confrontation in spite of similar origins pits the miners who resisted neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s against those who acceded to pressure to form worker cooperatives. Some political actors and analysts, such as García Linera, defend the new-social movement paradigm by arguing that the traditional working class has been severely weakened and conclude that the Morales government is “the government of social movements”.

The three governments’ class orientation, which does not center on the industrial proletariat, has implications for the strategies they follow. Inclusionary politics and social programs in general are

sometimes pursued at the expense of economic objectives. The Venezuelan government, for instance, has assigned large sums of money to community councils and worker cooperatives that are often not cost-effective but do include the previously excluded in decision making and provide them with valuable learning experiences and a sense of empowerment. These priorities contrast with the focus on production targets of “really existing socialism” during the Soviet all-out industrialization drive in the 1930s and the Great Leap Forward in China beginning in 1958.

Various parties on the left and center-left of the political spectrum implicitly or explicitly criticize the focus on the marginalized and semi-marginalized sectors and the emphasis on social programs over economic objectives and insist on the primacy of industry, productivity, and the working class. Social-democratic-oriented parties such as the Patria para Todos, which dropped out of the pro-Chavista governing coalition in 2010, and the ID of Ecuador embrace this discourse. Both parties have lashed out at the governments of their respective nations for belittling technical competence and efficiency.

Farther to the left, Trotskyist factions in Venezuela, in accordance with their adherence to proletarian ideology, have expressed skepticism with regard to the government-promoted worker cooperatives that have received massive funding more as part of a social strategy in favour of the poor than as a way of promoting economic development. The cooperatives, which generally had only about five members each, often hired workers who were not protected by labour legislation, collective bargaining agreements, or union representation. The Communist parties of all three nations, while more supportive of the government, criticized it for underestimating the importance of the role of the working class and failing to respect its independence vis-à-vis the state.

While the three nations have failed to advance significantly in increasing their productive capacity as did the Soviet Union and China under initial Communist rule, they have made inroads in the diversification of commercial and technological relations. In their international dealings, all three governments have privileged relations with state companies and private ones outside of the advanced bloc over the multinationals. Venezuela, for instance, has attempted to lessen dependence on the multinationals by signing contracts with

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state oil companies in Russia, China, Belarus, Iran, and various Latin American nations for preliminary exploration of the oil-rich Orinoco oil belt for the purpose of obtaining certification. These developments are a reflection of the decline of U.S. political and economic strength.

Expropriations, threats of expropriations, confrontations, and greater state control of private (and particularly foreign-owned) companies have gone beyond the actions and discourse of most radical populist and nationalist Latin American governments since the 1930s. The Chavista government reasserted control of the oil industry and expropriated strategic sectors including electricity, steel, cement, and telecommunications in 2007 and 2008 and then took over firms accused of price speculation and others in order to limit the practice of outsourcing. In Bolivia, using the threat of expropriation and insisting on the irrevocability of deadlines for compliance with new legislation, the Morales government succeeded in pressuring foreign companies into accepting the law that obliges concessionaries to sell oil and gas to the state-owned oil company YPFB.

CONCLUSIONS

Scholars and political analysts have long been divided between those who emphasize the uniqueness of conditions in a given nation and those who assert the scientific nature of the social sciences and tend to generalize and synthesize across national boundaries. Similarly, leftist theoreticians are divided between those influenced by the Hegelian tradition of focusing on national trajectories that underpin distinct “roads to socialism” and those who apply what they allege to be the fixed laws of Marxism. This article has documented the convergences of three Latin American countries that are historically different in many respects but have adopted various similar policies and approaches to achieve structural change.

The common grounds include political and economic strategies that challenge the interests of traditional sectors in fundamental ways, the constellation of social groups and identities, some of which have played a more central role in political struggles than the traditional working class, and the celebration of national symbols associated with rebellions against the old order. The article attempts to underline the similarities between the presidencies of Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales,

and Rafael Correa by contrasting them with social democratic, really-existing-socialist, and classical populist experiences of the past. The three presidents also stand in sharp contrast with non-socialist, center-left governments in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, where political conflict and polarization are less acute, relations with the United States are less confrontational, and socialism has not been proclaimed as a goal.

Some social scientists have cautioned against viewing the “pink tide” in Latin America as a “homogenizing project” and called for a focus on diversity and specificity as a corrective to simplistic explanations. This article has also recognized heterogeneity and complexity. In the first place, it has discussed the diversity of social groups that support transformation, each with distinct interests and goals, and the resultant internal tensions that beset the left in all three nations. In the second place, it has explored the challenges faced by governments stemming from their trial-and-error approach to socialism, which attempts to avoid the perceived errors of “already existing socialism,” and which rejects simple solutions and formulas. In the third place, it has outlined the different models of democracy that underlie the clash between government and opposition and in doing so pointed to the diversity of criteria that complicates the debate over the boundaries between democratic and non-democratic behaviour.

These conflicting definitions of democracy and their application to concrete conditions have complex implications that are at odds with the simplicity of the thesis of the “populist,” authoritarian left put forward by Castañeda and Morales and other ardent critics of twenty-first century socialism. In short, diversity and complexity characterize the political landscape in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador even while the three countries share basic features such as sharp political and social polarization, political systems that borrow significantly from radical democracy and governments that embrace an anti-capitalist discourse and a nationalist foreign policy.

NOTES

¹ See Jorge G. Castañeda and Marco A. Morales (eds.) *Leftovers: Tales of the Latin American Left*; New York and London: Routledge, Conaghan, 2008.

² Marta Harnecker, “Latin America and twenty-first-century socialism: inventing to avoid

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- mistakes”, *Monthly Review* 62 (3): 3–83, July-August 2010.
- ³ “Controlling state power: an interview with Vice President Álvaro García Linera”, by Linda Farthing, *Latin American Perspectives* 37 (4): 30–33, 2010.
- ⁴ Heinz Dieterich, “Evo Morales, communitarian socialism, and the regional power block”, *MRZine* (Monthly Review), 2006.
- ⁵ Rafael Correa, “Building socialism for the 21st century in Ecuador” (interview by Helen Yaffe), *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism*, [Revolutionary Communist Group] 212 (December–January), 2009-2010.
- ⁶ José Carlos Mariátegui, *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* [*Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*], Montevideo: Biblioteca de Marcha, 1970.
- ⁷ Sara Motta argues that orthodox Marxists, with their focus on production as the centre of political contestation and social democrats minimize the importance of social-movement, territorial-based struggle because it is often unable to engage the state or impact national politics. See Sara C. Motta, “Old tools and new movements in Latin America: political science as gatekeeper or intellectual illuminator?” *Latin American Politics and Society* 51 (1): 31–56, 2009.
- ⁸ Michael A. Lebowitz, “The spectre of socialism for the 21st century”, Keynote Address to the annual meeting of the Society for Socialist Studies, Vancouver, June 5, 2008.
- ⁹ Laclau has refuted the concept of the “multitude” put forward by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri because “they tend to oversimplify the tendencies towards unity operating within the multitude”. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2005.