

Beyond Theory - the Practice of Building Socialism in Latin America

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Global Research Editor's Note

In the interest of sharing diversity of opinions and promoting an atmosphere of exchange and critique, we bring to the attention of our readers the following text by Jorge Capelán and Toni Solo.

This text is in response to an article published on Global Research entitled [The Pink Tide in Latin America: An Alliance Between Local Capital and Socialism?](#) by Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya on May 03, 2013.

For the imperial propaganda machine, leftist Latin American governments and political leaders are either too leftist, not really leftist, or blind fanatics, as well as being shrewdly machiavellian, capitalists in red clothing, enemies of the market and scores of other contradictory pairs of things all at once.

This is so because the purpose of propaganda is to render unusable the intellectual capacity of the target population to understand reality. By promoting mistrust, anxiety and confusion among those sections of the public in the imperialist countries that might oppose the designs of their rulers, the war planners seek to neutralize any effective solidarity efforts.

Sadly, most European and North American progressive and radical movements and intellectuals have problems coming to terms with this, no matter what their experience, reputation or insights into what the Empire routinely does to humanity.

Without direct involvement in them, virtually none of those intellectuals can offer a true and fair view of Latin America's various revolutionary processes. They may offer plausible theories and schemas, but the nitty gritty of achieving power and effecting radical change will always elude them. Examples of this fact abound.

Depending entirely on academics like Noam Chomsky, or James Petras, for example, for a grasp of events in Latin America is a mistake. Those writers theoretical preconceptions tend to fall apart when applied to specific realities. One need not follow the anti-Stalinism of the historian E.P.Thompson into its ultimate social-democrat cul-de-sac to acknowledge the central argument of "The Poverty of Theory" against idealist theory.

The article ["Pink Tide in Latin America: An Alliance Between Local Capital and Socialism"](#) by [Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya](#) published on May 3 by Global Research is an example of this sad

truth. In the final paragraphs of his article, a series of reflections on the future developments in the region after Chavez' death, the author writes: "It can be argued that the political current in Latin America is mostly a question of financial and economic independence, rather than a socialist project challenging the capitalist world-system."

Without developing further this thesis, Nazemroaya's piece actually is an exercise in inconsequential and superficial dissection of the progressive/radical governments in the region, with the purpose of questioning the anti-capitalist character of the process of integration taking place in Latin America. Since Nazemroaya's analysis spreads many biases and mistaken views that are functional to the imperial propaganda efforts against those governments, we will deal with it in this article, but first let us address the core thesis the author put forward in his piece without thoroughly grounding it.

Indeed, there is a (conflictive) synergy between (some) Capitalist and anti-capitalist interests behind the movement for Latin American unity and independence. There is a huge amount of money in the hands of the Latin American oligarchies which, under the right circumstances, might be interested in investing in the regional market rather than, say, in the Swiss banking system or in regional tax havens. The emergence of China as a major lender and investor in the region, the stagnation of the US and European economies and the massive development projects carried out thanks to the initiative of governments which Nazemroaya designates under the derogatory term "Pink Tide", explain some of the central drives behind this process. But does this mean that what is going on in Latin America today is not the emergence of "a socialist project challenging the capitalist world-system"?

Whoever doesn't see the anti-capitalist value of ending the hegemony of Western imperialism once and for all and of building a multi-polar world order should start writing science-fiction novels instead of feigning engagement in actual anti-capitalist struggle. It's really puzzling that a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization has problems grasping this point. However, there is much more to the anti-capitalist ambitions of the Latin American integrationist efforts than the multi-polar dimension alone.

In Latin America, it is impossible to engage in the construction of socialist and anti-capitalist alternatives without at the same time struggling to integrate the region politically, economically and even culturally. "I desire to see America fashioned into the greatest nation in the world, greatest not so much by virtue of her area and wealth as by her freedom and glory" (1). That is the legacy of Bolivar, as was the legacy of Martí, of Sandino, Mariátegui, Gaitán, Che, Fidel Castro and many other Latin American revolutionaries since Independence. This is so because the colonial and imperial powers needed to split the region up into small countries in order to exploit its resources and labor. This is not something Chavez made up, it is an old insight down here.

At the core of the Latin American process of independent integration is the Bolivarian Alliance, ALBA, which comprises 8 full members with a total population of 70 or 80 million (some 15% of the region's population) plus an ever-growing list of countries participating as guest members and observers.

ALBA's economic relationships are not based on profit but on solidarity and complementarity among its members. Nor is it an alliance of convenience, but a project aimed at consolidating a higher political unit beyond Capitalism. It is not based on Venezuelan charity either, but on the use of common resources as a lever enabling its member countries to leave Capitalism behind.

Through ALBA and schemes such as PETROCARIBE (18 member countries), Venezuelan oil imports are re-invested by non oil-producing countries in social and economic programs financed by almost interest-free long-term loans. Thus, agricultural countries such as Nicaragua widen their list of trade partners, but most importantly, they develop and diversify their economies, becoming less dependent on the export of agricultural products.

Exchanges at all levels between Venezuela, Cuba and the rest of the ALBA member countries aim at sharing experiences on all fields. For example, Nicaraguan rural workers travel to Venezuela to share their experiences of cooperative organization in order to help Venezuela increase its food production. Cuban personnel from many different fields, specially health care and education, play a very important role in many social programs, but they also share their experience and know-how while at the same time gathering many experiences from their colleagues in the other member countries. ALBA members have started using their own national currencies instead of the US dollar to trade with each other through a financial arrangement called SUCRE, the Unified System of Regional Compensation. This scheme helps protect the ALBA's economies from the financial collapse of Capitalism.

From the examples above, it is foolish to deny the anticapitalist dynamics of ALBA. Even more foolish would be to deny ALBA's influence on the rest of Latin America.

ALBA was founded in 2004 after an agreement between Venezuela and Cuba. The following year, in 2005, the US plan to build a "free trade" zone in the Americas, the FTAA, was buried at the Summit of The Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina, when most Latin American governments refused to hail Bush's offer of "open up your customs or else..." Without the joint leadership of Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales, Lula da Silva and late Argentinean president Néstor Kirchner, this strategic defeat of imperialism in Latin America would not have been possible.

With the establishment, on February 23rd, 2010, of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, CELAC, the 33 countries in the region, for the first time in history, created an organization outside the control of the United States and Canada. Without the role played by Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua, CELAC's profile would not be as integral as it is today. Actually, Venezuela's contribution was crucial, not only because of the strategic dimension of the Bolivarian revolution, but also because of its intelligent handling of the most reactionary sectors of the Colombian oligarchy represented by Alvaro Uribe.

It is quite clear that some Capitalist interests see important opportunities in all these developments, but they are not politically organized. The Latin American right is dominated by highly aggressive, reactionary pro-imperialist political parties, right-wing networks and corporate media. On a daily bases, these groups conspire and carry out disinformation campaigns against almost all governments in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially those with progressive and radical inclinations.

In his article, Nazemroaya questions these government's leftist and anti-capitalist credentials. Although he warns against "oversimplification and romanticization", and although he tries to define what he understands as "left", Nazemroaya confuses the concepts and decontextualizes the facts, ending up with a list of more or less flattering aspects which he then uses to build up a negative portrait of the developments in Latin America.

Let us start with the concepts. Correctly, Nazemroaya defines “left” and “right” as political positions within a given context, but he then almost immediately abandons all interest in understanding the multiplicity of the contexts that compose the reality of the region to focus on the fact that there is “a Plethora of ‘Lefts’ in Latin America”, an “eclectic bunch” as the author’s derogatory style defines them.

Nazemroaya goes even further and states that “Latin American left-wing governments do not strictly operate to the ‘left’”: So, according to his actual view, there is a “real left” (a context-independent Left he feels he is entitled to define as such) and some kind of “fake left” (another context-independent left he thinks one is entitled to denounce as false). As “proof” of his assertion, the author refers to an alleged “debate over whether the Cuban socialist project is genuinely reforming or if it will eventually follow the paths of capitalist restoration like China and Vietnam”.

A debate where? In some cafe in Toronto? That is not a serious argument, for two reasons. Firstly, the existence of debates about the future course of a revolution are no proof of the actual orientation of that revolution. Secondly, Nazemroaya passes as received truths his opinions on socialism in China and Vietnam without feeling it necessary to go into any further details.

Actually, as true as the fact that there are many “lefts” in Latin America, is the fact that there is a vast experience of collective discussions among those “lefts”. An example of this is the Forum of Sao Paulo, which since 1990 has gathered more than 90 political organizations from almost all countries, including Puerto Rico. Most countries are represented by several political parties, and in cases such as Argentina and Uruguay, by 12 or 13 organizations.

For over 20 years, those organizations, ranging from the Chilean Socialist Party to the Cuban Communist Party, from various Peronist parties in Argentina to Peruvian nationalists, just to mention a few examples, have been able to carry out many debates and achieve consensus around key issues such as the struggle to end the US genocidal blockade of Cuba, the support to the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and ALBA as well as the project of continental integration.

The huge continental wave of solidarity with the Bolivarian revolution after Hugo Chavez’ death, especially in face of the fascist violence unleashed by Capriles Radonski’s thugs, is another case in point in relation to the capacity of this variegated array of “leftist” movements to very quickly set aside their differences for a common cause. Without the existence of similar mechanisms and processes, it would have been impossible, in recent months, to mobilize a movement capable of denouncing the Cuban CIA agent Yoani Sanchez World Tour. In capital after capital where the CIA blogger attempted to smear Cuba, she was received by large groups of activists that on several occasions managed to force her to desist from her activities.

Another case in point, The existence of the Network of Intellectuals in Defence of Humanity, composed of hundreds, if not thousands, of intellectuals from all over the world and from a broad ideological spectrum, routinely organizing campaigns in defence of Cuba, Venezuela and ALBA, as well as against imperialist putschist moves in countries such as Honduras, Ecuador or Paraguay. Without denying the differences between various political movements, it is necessary to stress that there exists an ever-growing common understanding of the problems and challenges ahead.

Nazemroaya warns against easy generalizations but goes on to make sweeping generalizations such as the following:

“Latin America’s comprador elites are the local representatives of the foreign corporations, governments, and interests that have exploited Latin America for centuries. These comprador elites can frankly be described as either the ‘House Negros’ or racist upper class that have historically ruled Latin America and managed its wealth and resources for the changing centres of power in other parts of the world that have controlled the area. Today, the regional comprador elites are mostly aligned with the United States and prefer Miami or New York City to Caracas or Quito”.

One first commentary about this description is obvious: If the Latin American “comprador elites are mostly aligned with the US and prefer Miami or New York to Caracas or Quito”, how can they actually be a driving force behind a process of regional integration that is not to the liking of the US, NATO and Europe? Are they really a driving force behind this process as Nazemroaya implies?

This is the kind of sweeping, oversimplifying generalization that makes it impossible to understand the contexts and the particular traits of the various countries in the region. This in turn explains why there are so many “lefts” which, incidentally, show a startling capacity to cooperate with each other and to reach a common consensus around key issues. Also, such oversimplifying generalizations make it impossible to understand the complexities of the international relations among the region’s countries, for example, in the case of the relations between Colombia and Venezuela and the Peace Process taking place between FARC-EP and Santos.

The 33 nations that compose Latin America and the Caribbean show a common situation of dependence on imperialism, but they also show startling differences. Countries like Chile, Argentina or Uruguay have very strong European cultural influence, while other countries, such as Bolivia or Guatemala have big indigenous majorities. Some oligarchies are richer than others, some of them have had more freedom than others to carry out policies of import substitution.

Some countries, such as Honduras and Paraguay, have been ruthlessly subjected to a state of utmost political underdevelopment for decades by repressive dictatorships, while others, such as Ecuador or Uruguay, have enjoyed relatively long periods of successful reformism. Although Latin America is the world’s most unequal region, not all countries and societies are equally poor and not all of them are equally underdeveloped. Different forms of dependent economic insertion in the World Market, different political cultures, different social realities explain the differences among the political subjects.

Are “Latin America’s comprador elites ... the local representatives of the foreign corporations, governments, and interests that have exploited Latin America for centuries” as Nazemroaya puts it? They are many other things besides that. They are mediators between the Western multinational interests and the local markets, but in many cases, they are players on their own right as well. Think about the example of Mexican Carlos Slim, the world’s richest man. Think about the financial Colombian capitalists represented by Santos or even sectors of the Brazilian oligarchy. They fear Socialism and most progressive politics, but they also fear the prospects of a sociopolitical meltdown that would make their profits vanish into thin air. In many cases, they have to reluctantly accept many of the progressives’ and radicals’ policies, even if their newspapers routinely pour bile on those

governments.

Lacking a better political reference frame, Nazemroaya lays hand on James Petras' typology on the Latin American left – one the weakest intellectual products of the US-American sociologist. With this typology, an otherwise sharp analyst such as Petras cannot resist the Western temptation of handing out small stars of revolutionary approval to movements he fancies more than others, irrespective of the concrete circumstances of their struggles. Incapable of understanding many of the true challenges of social transformation in the real world and the actual limits of political power, Petras projects his romanticized revolutionary ideals on various movements and subjects. When those movements in real life do not behave according to Petras' wishes, they are either ditched or condescendingly tapped on the back with some scornful comment on having “sold out”. Apparently unable to understand the value of nation-building for the materialization of any sort of socialist project, he rejects movements such as Peronismo, irrespective of how stubbornly the working-class masses support them.

Petras' schematic division between “radical left”, “pragmatic left”, “pragmatic neo-liberals” and “doctrinaire neo-liberal regimes” is seriously flawed when confronted with reality. If FARC were in the same situation as PSUV in Venezuela, it would certainly act along much the same lines. In fact, it supports the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela and shares its inspirational force, namely, the heritage of Simon Bolivar.

In Brazil, the Landless Workers' Movement gives critical support to the Worker's Party (PT). While it rightly criticizes the agribusiness-oriented development strategy of Lula's and Dilma Rousseff's party, the Landless Workers' Movement also understands the various constraints the PT government faces being dependent on alliances with other political forces, in an immense country where the oligarchy retains considerable power at all levels. They are also well aware of what it would mean were the neo-liberal right to return to political power in Brazil.

In Argentina, to call Cristina Fernández a “pragmatic neo-liberal” is an outright insult, not to mention an irresponsible lack of solidarity with a progressive government subject every day to the most vicious destabilizing campaigns from the oligarchy. No neo-liberal regime increases minimum wages, raises pensions, improves education or fights poverty. Nor does any neo-liberal regime say “Good-bye” to IMF the way Argentina has done.

The same goes for Mauricio Funes' government in El Salvador, where the FMLN is on its way to win the coming elections with a candidate of its own. Incapable of identifying processes and accumulation of forces, dogmatic analysts such as Petras/Nazemroaya see only traitors, sell-outs and capitalists everywhere. The superficiality of Petras' analysis becomes sheer bad faith when it comes to certain countries he simply doesn't mention such as Nicaragua, where cooperatives account for about 40% of the country's GDP and about 70% of the work force.

Back in mid-2008, a group of leading left-wing Western intellectuals, most prominently Noam Chomsky, wrote a letter supporting a hunger strike held by ex-FSLN leader Dora Maria Tellez in Nicaragua. Tellez was protesting the elimination of her MRS political alliance from the municipal elections in November of that year for having failed to comply with the electoral law. So Noam Chomsky and the other well-respected intellectuals concerned demonstrated the loyalty and solidarity of their intellectual-managerial class and spoke out on her behalf.

In fact, as it transpired, the MRS immediately entered into an electoral alliance with the Nicaragua's corrupt extreme right-wing PLC party. They campaigned in particular in support of reactionary banker, Eduardo Montealegre who to this day uses his parliamentary immunity to avoid indictment for multi-million dollar banking fraud. Clearly, the MRS suckered Noam Chomsky and his fellow intellectuals into misguidedly supporting her 2008 charade, because those intellectuals had no idea of the political realities in Nicaragua. Anyone who doubts MRS' allegiance to the US Embassy in Managua, should read some of the diplomatic cables recently released by WikiLeaks on the subject.

That particular case only highlights the pitfalls of depending on the neat schemes of the managerial class who dominate intellectual production in North America and Europe. So when Nazemroaya cites James Petras as his theoretical reference point in his recent article on Latin America, one needs to apply extreme skepticism to his arguments so as to try and discern the reality. Among the typical omissions of James Petras and his colleagues, Nicaragua understandably looms large by its absence.

They see that a given country still is in the grip of IMF loans, but they are incapable of seeing that the country is becoming less dependent on such loans. They see that a given country is depending on agro-exports, but they don't see how that country is diversifying its economy and becoming less dependent on those exports. They see capitalists and State-Capitalism and cry "Neoliberalism! Extractivism!" without even proposing a workable alternative that might to develop a country's productive forces. Or else when they actually see those alternatives being implemented by those governments, they shout "It is not enough!".

To revolutions applies an old Latin American saying: "It is easy to look at the lady from afar, but quite a different story to go ahead and talk to her".

A superficial and disrespectful treatment of developments in Latin America poses two sets of problems. The first one is that it makes practical solidarity more difficult, especially now, when Washington is engaging in a fascist continental crusade against Latin America. The second set of problems has to do with the crucial importance of the Latin American experience for any new projects beyond Capitalism anywhere else in the world.

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