

The Future in Question:  
History and Utopia in Latin America (1989–2010)

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A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.

—Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” 1891

The year 1989, world historical for many reasons, marked the close of a long period of military dictatorships in Latin America. It also initiated novel approaches to progress through democratic procedures and the reconceptualization of democracy as not only a means to achieve progress but also one of its central ends. At that time, the defeat of Augusto Pinochet in a plebiscite brought to an end a dictatorship that had imposed on Chile a harsh neoliberal “shock treatment” that inaugurated neoliberalism’s ascendancy in Latin America. Pinochet’s victorious opponent in 1989 was the *Concertación*, an electoral alliance of seventeen political parties, committed to promoting political democracy as well as social welfare and thus to binding together political and social rights. Only two decades later, several Latin American countries are governed by presidents who seek to deepen democracy by rejecting neoliberalism and proclaiming ideals commonly associated with socialist principles; more than three hundred million of the over five hundred million people who

live in Latin America are governed today, in 2010, by such leaders. To a large extent this change at the level of the state has been propelled by new social movements, indigenous communities, and political organizations that have struggled to construct a more equal and just society. Politics in Latin America during this period has veered from the familiar path. Despite visible as well as submerged continuities, novelty, apparent by the introduction of new actors, innovative agendas, and original ideals, has been its birthmark. Encompassing a wide range of heterogeneous processes in many of Latin America's twenty nations, this unprecedented transformation escapes conventional categories. What are we to make of this complex political change, one commonly referred to as Latin America's "turn to the left"?

In this chapter, I explore this broad question by focusing on a particular topic: the image of the ideal future that animates these changes. I examine this imagined future, the present-day future imaginary, not the Left's potential or likely future, however important these questions may be. While this is already a bounded topic, I draw even more precise boundaries around it. Given these nations' diversity and their internal heterogeneity, I limit my exploration by directing attention to the ways imaginaries of the future inhabit the state, the nation's central representative and main agent of "progress." This future imaginary can be glimpsed in everyday political actions and discourses as well as through concrete cultural artifacts such as plans, projects, and constitutions. Yet, since fundamental conceptions of history—not their specific content but their framing temporal structure—are often implicit or taken for granted, I focus on how ineffable imaginaries of the future inhabit the present, how the "what is to be" saturates the "what is" or, in Reinhardt Koselleck's terms, how the "horizon of expectation" relates to the "space of experience during this leftward turn."<sup>1</sup>

The polemical notion of the "Left" has historically been given changing and contested meanings. Norberto Bobbio has provided a parsimonious conceptual grid for classifying political orientations in terms of the dual axis of equality/inequality and liberty/authoritarianism. According to him, *left* and *right* are not absolute but relative terms that represent shifting positions within an always historically specific political spectrum. For him, the Left is basically defined by a movement from inequality to equality; liberty can be associated with it, but it is not its

defining criterion.<sup>2</sup> Building on his insightful discussion but avoiding its rather sharp separation between equality and liberty, I use the notion of “left” as a fluid sign to identify actions directed toward universal equality and well-being and thus toward forms of political life without which these goals cannot be achieved, including democracy, diversity, justice, and freedom. The meaning of each of these terms depends on the meanings of the others, so that they form a conceptual ensemble. Rather than being fixed or given, the particular significance of these terms individually and as an ensemble is the product of historical contests over their significance.

Since left and right are relational categories defined through mutual interaction, the changing meanings of leftist projects have been produced by struggles to overcome the ever-changing relations of domination exerted by specific “rights.” The Left stands in opposition to the Right because it pursues general well-being in ever more domains, ever more comprehensively. Conceptualizing it thus as an expansive democratizing political project, the “Left” can be identified with discrete achievements, such as the recognition of the rights of ethnic communities or of “nature” as a political actor, as established in Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, as well as with the general process that encompasses them, such as the pursuit of an alternative social order guided by the indigenous concept of *el buen vivir*—living well (*sumak kawsay* in Kichwa).

As a political project, the pursuit of well-being for all—and all now includes non-human entities—is now less than ever the monopoly of the “West,” of its dominant conceptions and logics. In effect, these struggles in Latin America are part of a decolonizing process that challenges the ethnocentrism of Western modernity and opens up spaces for other imaginaries based on different histories, epistemologies, aesthetics, and ethics. Since the Left/Right distinction is a Western scheme, it is understandable that its use has been contested in Latin America; current struggles entail defining what the “Left” is and whether it is still a relevant category. Perhaps more than in other periods (at least in Latin America), there are now multiple “leftist” ways of imagining an ideal society, entailing competing notions of well-being, justice, and rights. Some seek to expand material prosperity and individual rights to all, often entailing contests over the definition of collective and individual forms of property; others are based on conceptions of harmony among populations, with each other and with their common natural surroundings; “nature” is now represented

in political discourse in some Andean nations not as an entity to be controlled or exploited by human beings but as a sentient being with rights of its own. For some, “right” and “left” are no longer relevant political categories. This proliferation of movements and positions erodes Western hegemony without necessarily entailing the rejection of the West or the establishment of an exclusive alternative hegemonic center. At this time, it no longer seems viable, or perhaps even desirable, to grant historical leadership to a privileged political agent or to postulate a universally valid political standpoint. Through exchanges among universalizing practices and ideals coming from within and outside the West, from centers as well as margins, these changes in Latin America have made it possible to question parochial universalisms and to pursue a more open universality.<sup>3</sup> Not without a sense of its inadequacy, in this essay I use the term “Left” to refer to these changes.

My central argument is that a puzzling paradox has marked this leftward turn. On the one hand, there is a proliferation of political activities inspired by socialist or communitarian ideals aiming at fundamentally changing society. On the other, there is a pervasive uncertainty with respect to the specific form of the ideal future. While there is an intense desire to change the nation, it is not clear *what* to desire—what are realistic aspirations, how to connect desire and reality. It has become common in Latin America to entertain the belief that actually existing capitalism is unviable for the long term while recognizing that socialism as it has actually existed offers no viable models for the future. Indeed, the project to build a “socialism of the twenty-first century,” as proposed in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, entails an implicit critique of the historical socialisms of the twentieth century, but its various national expressions thus far do not seem to have provided an alternative to them. Under the stewardship of leftist states, economic activity continues to unfold on the basis of capitalist relations, yet standing in tense relation to the expectation of an indefinitely deferred postcapitalist future. The entanglement between utopian aspirations and pragmatic or opportunistic accommodation has had tumultuous and contradictory effects on everyday life, personal relations, and national politics.

During this leftist turn, the present—the experience of the here and now—seems to be pulled by conflicting forces. On the one hand, it is animated by numerous struggles for a better society. On the other, it

is trapped by formidable barriers that block these struggles. The hope of bringing about fundamental change is often displaced by the debilitating sense that human society cannot be improved. This double vision generates a split world, one that appears to oscillate between the malleable landscape of utopian imaginaries and the immutable ground of recalcitrant histories. From the fissure between these worlds there emanate contradictory dispositions and incentives that stretch the present forward and push the desired future toward an uncertain horizon. The Left pursues a just future, but its particular content eludes it. It has a sense of direction but no clear destination.

With the title “The Future in Question,” this chapter seeks to evoke the distinctive presence of the future in Latin America during this turn to the left, the contradictory ways in which the coming time saturates the here and now and affects the current political imaginary. On the one hand, the future enters the public stage as an open horizon of expectation, as potentiality, offering a hopeful sense of possibility characteristic of liminal phases or revolutions. On the other, the future imposes its presence as a receding historical horizon, a future in doubt, inducing a sense of despondency typical of periods of decline or historical depression. I explore in two parts the question of this future. In the first, I discuss briefly the context in which the current Latin American Left has emerged. In the second, I examine the Left’s future now, the paradoxical mode in which it has come to inhabit the present.

## Emergence

I restrict my discussion of the rise of the Left to a brief outline of three conditions that affect its development at this time. These conditions have to do with the changing fate of the two major modernizing paradigms in the twentieth century, capitalism and socialism, and the crisis of neoliberalism, a model of capitalist development that at the end of the twentieth century promised to offer the key to progress.

### *The End of Socialism*

The first condition is the global crisis and collapse of actually existing socialism at the end of the twentieth century (one could also say, the

collapse of “actually nonexistent socialism”—or of various forms of state capitalism), symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the rapid immersion of China in capitalist markets and logics. This collapse has been widely interpreted not just as the end of particular historical socialisms but as the historical end of socialism.

### *The Victory of Capitalism*

The second condition is the apparent global triumph of capitalism. As soon as one of the two rivals in the twentieth-century struggle for world supremacy vanished, it seemed not just that the other antagonist was victorious but that its victory was permanent. Moreover, as if blinded by success, ideologues of capitalism also claimed that its promise of universal progress was soon to be universally realized. At the close of the century, neoliberalism had achieved globally the status of a sacred dogma. Conceptualized as the triumph of economic science over political ideologies, it proposed the dominion of technocracy in social affairs and the demotion of politics to the domain of the partisan and the emotional. In 1989, John Williamson coined the term “the Washington Consensus” to refer to a decalogue of policy prescriptions that would ensure that all nations that followed it, even those with serious economic problems, would achieve economic growth. These policies reflected the integration of geopolitical concerns with a technical version of neoclassical economics that reduces social life to an individualistic calculus of utilities or a game of expectations. This fantasy of universal progress was famously articulated in Francis Fukuyama’s paradigmatic 1989 article (and 1992 book) in which he proclaimed the “end of history.” In these texts, he argued that the worldwide generalization of the free market would dissolve ideological struggles, bring about progress, and create global harmony.

### *The Crisis of Neoliberalism*

The third condition concerns the negative impact of free-market policies: growing polarization within and among nations, ecological destruction, exclusion of vast sectors of the population, the subordination of production to financial speculation, and pervasive individualism and consumerism. These effects have been felt in the capitalist system as a whole but earlier and more intensely in the Global South.

Because Latin American countries in most cases obtained their political independence in the first quarter of the nineteenth century—rather than after World War II, like most new nations in Africa and Asia—they have had extensive experience with various forms of modernization projects, from liberal ones in the nineteenth century, before the recent neoliberal phase, to state-centered ones during most of the twentieth century, ranging from state-promoted import substituting industrialization (ISI) to state-supported export promotion. Some Latin American countries sought to modernize through distinct models of socialism or of socialist-inspired political projects: Chile under Salvador Allende (1971–73), Nicaragua under the Sandinistas (1979–89), and Cuba under Fidel Castro and, since 2006, his brother Raul (1959–current).

In response to the global hegemony of neoliberalism, during the last two decades of the twentieth century most states in Latin America reduced the role of the state in the economy, dismantled welfare institutions, deregulated the economy, and promoted the pursuit of comparative advantages according to free-market principles. These changes brought about aggregate economic growth but at the cost of a more polarized society and severe social dislocations. In response to these problems, the region saw the rise of a large variety of social and political movements focusing on specific demands, often inspired by socialist ideals, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil (MST), the Piqueteros (unemployed) in Argentina, and the indigenous movements in the Andean nations. In part because of neoliberalism's polarizing effects, but also as a result of the activism of social movements and political organizations, the ideological supremacy of neoliberalism did not last long in Latin America. Even Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the acclaimed *dependentista* scholar who as president of Brazil (1995–2003) endorsed neoliberal policies and helped to integrate Brazil further into the structures of global capitalism, made it clear that he held no illusions about globalization's future: in his own lapidary expression, "Within globalization, no alternative, outside globalization, no salvation."<sup>4</sup>

Through regional meetings, the political organizations and social movements that opposed neoliberalism developed alliances and common projects. After a series of such meetings, representatives of these movements joined with kindred activists from all over the world in the World

Social Forum, a gathering that met for the first time in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Ever since, the World Social Forum has sought to articulate these disparate organizations in a common alliance against neoliberalism and for social justice and democracy. Indeed, for these movements and organizations, it has been clear that neoliberal globalization offers no real alternative. And yet, because “actually existing socialism” has not offered salvation, it has been easier for them to criticize neoliberalism than to articulate a viable alternative to it. Their concrete proposals typically address particularly harsh aspects of capitalism, not capitalism itself as a whole system.

With no visible redemption outside or within capitalism, utopian dreams have not so much vanished as taken the form of a rather raw hope for a remote future; the Left has centered its critique on acute forms of domination by capital rather than on capitalism. As historian John French has perceptively noted, a focus on the critique of neoliberalism obscures an acceptance of capitalism. At the same time, it also serves to unite disparate sectors in the longstanding struggle for national development:

If opposition to neoliberalism, not to capitalism, marks the fundamental boundary of the contemporary left, as I would argue, the terminology could be said to obscure the essential capitalist and imperialist enemy, if viewed in orthodox Marxist terms. Yet the emphasis on neoliberalism is especially appropriate to Latin America, where autonomous or semi-autonomous national development (be it capitalist or socialist) has long been a shared goal across the political spectrum. While anti-capitalism has had its place in the discourse of the region's left, the practical emphasis has more often been on the incapacity of capitalism to achieve the autonomous national development being sought, while the bourgeoisie has long been criticized for failing to spark a bourgeois democratic revolution or deliver prosperity to the masses.<sup>5</sup>

This insightful comment helps us see the current dilemmas of the Left in the context of Latin America's recurrent struggle to achieve some variant of Western progress. The region's long postcolonial experience has made it familiar with the shortcomings of different development projects and rather accustomed to the interplay between renewed promises and

deferred achievements. At this time, however, the combination of widespread engagement in transformative politics with intensified uncertainty about the future has created particularly intense tensions between grand expectations and quotidian practices.

When neoliberalism was promoted as a reigning ideology in the United States and England, Latin America became the experimental ground for the implementation of neoliberal “shock treatments,” most notably in Pinochet’s Chile (1973–89) under the tutelage of the infamous “Chicago Boys” and during the ruthless rule of Argentina’s military junta (1976–83). Through less repressive means, these policies were also implemented by democratic regimes, such as those of Carlos Andrés Pérez during his second presidency in Venezuela (1989–93) and Fernando de la Rúa in Argentina (1999–2001). In both cases, these presidents were removed from power largely as a result of the effects of these policies, Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1993, Fernando de la Rúa in 2001.

Given this history of truncated modernizing projects, it is understandable that Latin America became the region with some of the earliest and strongest protests against the current phase of neoliberal structural adjustments. Needless to say, the strongest opposition to them came as part of the struggles against the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina that had implemented these policies as a package, or “shock treatment,” that was at once economic, cultural, and political. In other contexts, protests were largely a spontaneous response to a particular set of policies, such as Venezuela’s 1989 *Caracazo*, the largest and most violently repressed anti-IMF uprising in the world, in reaction to food shortages and increased gasoline and transportation costs, or Argentina’s massive movement in 2001 to oust President Fernando de la Rúa under the slogan *que se vayan todos* (away with them all), an unexpected protest in a country considered until then a model of the Washington Consensus but suddenly torn by a financial crisis and devastated productive structures resulting from the implementation of this model. In other cases, protests were carried out by social movements that had long organized toward this end, as during the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, coinciding with the implementation by the Mexican state of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement.

As one would expect, despite neoliberalism’s negative effects in the Global South, its limitations became globally visible only when they

impacted the North. When its policies did not work in the South, the dominant view attributed this failure not to the free market but to these backward nations, not to the cure but to “patients” unprepared to undergo the whole policy prescription. It was only as a result of the 2008 financial meltdown in the United States that the free market lost its sacred aura. As if a veil had been lifted, the whole world could now see the unregulated free market not as a self-regulating natural principle but as an all-too-human invention gone wild that needs to be disciplined and supported by the state. While the election of Barack Obama was to a large extent a response to the effects of neoliberalism in the United States—of the housing crisis and the financial meltdown resulting from deregulation—the election of many leftist presidents in Latin America was a much earlier response to the multiple effects of neoliberalism in the region.

Several genealogies and typologies have been produced to account for this leftward shift in Latin America. Most journalists and academics, despite their differing interpretations, see the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 as the beginning of this shift, as his campaign was marked by an identification of democracy with the welfare state, a strong rejection of neoliberalism, and the promise of radical change. This makes sense, insofar as his election initiated a cycle of electoral victories of presidents who pledged to undertake fundamental social transformations. I prefer to mark the source of this shift with the electoral defeat of Pinochet in 1989 in order to highlight what I regard as central to this change: the value attached to democracy as the political form through which to pursue collective welfare and as a value in itself. But there is a difference. In Chile at that time, a society marked by intense political conflicts and torn by a brutal dictatorship, the establishment of political democracy was the major challenge faced by the multiparty alliance that sought to overturn the Pinochet regime; this alliance proposed to ameliorate the negative effects of neoliberalism, not to replace it. Now, in a period when neoliberalism has been in decline if not in crisis, all leftist presidents elected after Chávez have promised to deepen democracy by limiting neoliberalism and implementing fundamental social welfare measures: in 2002, Lula da Silva in Brazil; in 2003, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina; in 2004, Tabaré Vazquez in Uruguay; in 2005, Evo Morales in Bolivia; in 2006, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Hugo Chávez reelected in Venezuela; in 2008, Fernando Lugo in

Paraguay; in 2009, José Mujica in Uruguay; and in 2010, Dilma Rousseff in Brazil. Despite their differences, the pursuit of a deeper democracy has been their common ground.

Perhaps the most influential typology about these left regimes was a rather early scheme devised by Mexican scholar and politician Jorge Castañeda, who divided their leaders into reasonable reformers and backward populists—implicitly, into the good and the bad Left. At one end he placed the “open-minded and modern left,” represented by Brazil’s Lula da Silva, and at the other end, the “closed-minded and populist left,” represented by Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez.<sup>6</sup> Even those who criticized Castañeda’s argument have tended to repeat its dichotomous structure, often making opposite evaluations—Lula as the compromising reformist and Chávez as the true revolutionary. Of course, from conservative perspectives, often expressed through the mainstream media, all these leftist governments are seen in a negative light; in the United States, the media tends to oscillate between setting the “good” Left against the “bad” one or treating them all as an undifferentiated negative force.

Under leftist rulers, political contests over different visions of society have stimulated public debate but have also tended to polarize political discourse, turning often useful simplifications into flat caricatures that block rather than stimulate understanding. In the context of heated political confrontations, this flattening of reason and heightening of emotions have affected political representations both in Latin America and abroad, including those produced in academic and artistic circles. For instance, Oliver Stone’s documentary on the rise of the Latin American Left, *South of the Border*, forcefully challenges blatant distortions produced by the US media but presents an inverse mirror image of the Left that reproduces the media’s flat vision of history. The demonization of the Left cannot be countered by its deification; the reduction of politics to a battle between Good and Evil must be challenged by accounts that develop the public’s capacity to make sense of the world and of the history that produces it. If the mainstream media numbs people, we need accounts that help unnumb them.

Seeking to avoid flat dichotomies, or at least to turn them into meaningful distinctions, I offer a scheme that helps explore the Left’s futures in Latin America by focusing on the conditions of possibility of historical change facing each nation. This scheme connects historical

experience and political expectations by noting how distinct sets of economic and political conditions affect different modalities of leftist politics.

*Political conditions.* In countries that have experienced recent dictatorships and severe political repression, the Left tends 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. On the other hand, in countries that come from conditions of economic and political turmoil and 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, Bolivia, and Ecuador.<sup>7</sup>

*Material conditions.* A twin set of core economic conditions fundamentally affects the relations between state and society during this shift to the left: how a nation's economic surplus is produced and how it obtains foreign exchange. While the generation of a 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 America as "nature-intensive" or resource-based economies.<sup>8</sup> Agricultural and mineral rents play different roles and have distinct social implications as elements of specific ensembles of social relations. Whereas agricultural lands are typically privately owned and are thus the foundation of landowning classes that benefit directly from them, mines are generally controlled by the state, and their rents help give the state central political and economic importance. In the Latin American context, the dominance of agricultural rents at the national level generally goes together with a dispersion of economic power, a relatively diversified economy, a strong business sector, and a structural conflict between exporters and consumers over the allocation of agricultural goods either as sources of foreign exchange

or as domestic consumer goods. Mineral rents, in contrast, tend to promote the concentration of power in the state, the creation of a subsidized and dependent business sector, and a structural conflict over the distribution of collective rents among citizens with equal rights over these rents but with unequal influence over the state that distributes them. Although ground rent is important in all societies, it plays a dominant role in nations in the Global South because of their subordinate position in the international division of labor and of nature. While I highlight the importance of natural resources, my argument counters the notion of the “resource curse,” for resources do not do anything by themselves but through the social relations that make them significant.

During this leftward swing, where agricultural rents are central in a national economy, they have tended to support the forging of alliances between classes and interest groups, the negotiation of policies between the state and major sectors, and the promotion of a moderate political style, as occurs in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. On the other hand, where mineral rents are the dominant locus of a national economy, they have promoted the concentration of power in the state, the dependence of the private sector on the state, and the development of a radical or immoderate political style that has intensified conflicts between classes and regions, as occurs in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In all Latin American nations, primary products (mineral or agricultural) remain the fundamental export commodities and sources of foreign exchange; in many countries, labor power, an unusual primary “export commodity,” has increasingly become, transformed into remittances, a major source of international currency. Despite the rejection of neoliberalism, the pursuit of comparative advantage in this domain continues to be the core economic policy of all Latin American states.

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 conditioning factors may have complementary as well as conflicting effects. For instance, in Chile, 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; this situation has not changed, except that the steady increase in copper prices in the past

few years has given the state even more financial power. In this respect, Chile, despite its more diversified economy and post-Pinochet conciliatory political style, shares with mining countries the presence of a strong state. In Argentina, despite a tendency to establish alliances during the post-dictatorship turn to democracy, there has been historically a chronic conflict between agricultural producers interested in exporting their products in order to maximize their profits and consumers interested in keeping them in the domestic market in order to improve their welfare. The state must negotiate between these conflicting demands, which often become explosive, as was the case in 2008, during Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's presidency.

In addition, other forms of foreign currency must also be taken into account, such as international loans, which typically come together with coercive "collateral" political obligations. For instance, during the second presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, when Brazil was facing severe financial needs and Lula was the likely candidate to win the 2002 presidential election, the IMF granted President Cardoso a US\$30 billion loan but stipulated that only US\$6 billion would be delivered to him and that the rest would be given to the new president under the agreement that all candidates would accept the IMF's prescriptions. Lula's Workers' Party (PT), through its "Letter to the Brazilian People," agreed to this condition.<sup>9</sup> This incident shows that the international financial community *no vota pero si veta* (does not vote, but it does veto).<sup>10</sup> Whether resulting from rents, profits, or loans, foreign exchange is a major force in the dynamics of what I have called "national" and "global" postcolonial imperialisms—modes of imperial dominion mostly exerted through economic control and political influence yet backed by the largest territorial and extraterritorial armed forces in human history.<sup>11</sup>

Since I find most labels commonly used to differentiate these leftist regimes inappropriate, I refer to the two groupings of this simple scheme by acronyms formed by the initials of three typical representatives of each: VEBo, for Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia; and BrAC, for Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. Despite their differences, one thing is clear: far from facing the end of History, all these nations face its return; for them, History is back. But what kind of history is this, and what future inspires it?

## The Left's Futures

It is remarkable but not exceptional that this leftward turn has entailed the return of History. National histories in Latin America have been typically represented as inscribed in a global historical journey toward Progress. What is rather exceptional about this juncture is not the reinscription of Latin America into History as a grand process but that now it is not clear where History is going.

Ever since the conquest and colonization of the Americas, the region's ruling elites have had a certain sense of its ideal future, or, perhaps more accurately, substantial models of ideal futures have heavily inhabited the region's quotidian life. Insofar as these elite imaginaries have been hegemonic, Latin America has lived the present under the shadow of the future; as Susana Rotker noted, "Latin America is ... an action without past or present, only a future."<sup>12</sup> Under the burden of imperial futures, the present has appeared as a transitional period, a stage of history to be left behind, if not simply rejected as an embarrassing reality. These ideal futures have always already been known because they have always been the present of metropolitan centers: first, of the "civilized" colonial empires and, after independence, of the major modern industrial nations.

The legitimacy of elites in Latin America has depended on their ability to be messengers of the future. As political and cultural leaders, their task has been to be brokers between Latin America and the "civilized" or "modern" world, in effect, between past and future. In order to perform this historical alchemy, they have to become, in their very beings, embodiments of the future. They incarnate the future through myriad techniques of the self, including socialization at home, selective consumption, education, travel, and language learning. One could identify which "future" has been imagined by these elites by tracing their travels and, most of all, by noting in which nation they have been educated and what languages and literatures they read. Historically, their crucible for self-making was first Spain and Portugal, but soon afterward it was France and England, and since World War II it has been the United States. For some leaders of the Left, of course, the Soviet Union and East Germany played this civilizing function. In Latin America, the main languages of civilization have been Spanish for Spain's postcolonies, Portuguese for Brazilians, and for all, first French and now English.

This mode of historicity saturates political life with the syndrome of the “non-yet,” a perspective that depicts some societies as always already not yet civilized, not yet industrial, not yet modern. It also classifies and ranks contemporary societies by transforming space into time, geographical contiguity into temporal distance, and cultural difference into evolutionary hierarchy. As a result, while existing at the same time in contiguous spaces, some societies are defined as civilized and others as primitive, representing an earlier and inferior stage of humanity. Given the dominance of this viewpoint, in Latin America’s relation to the modern world, simultaneity has not meant contemporaneity, for to be contemporaneous, as Ernst Bloch argued for other regions, is to be fully modern. Anthropologist Johannes Fabian has called this framing “the denial of coevalness,” that is, the construction of an “allochronic temporality” whereby simultaneously existing societies are given different evolutionary value and placed into different historical periods; while those treated as barbarous are displaced into the past, those viewed as civilized are kept in the present and presented as the apex of humanity.<sup>13</sup> When they are all placed on the same progressive arrow of time, non-Western societies are seen as representing the past of civilized societies and civilized ones as embodying the future of the non-West. When non-Western peoples are excluded from Western history, they are treated as radically other, more creatures of nature than creators of culture.

This historicist vision presents the West as the apex of civilization and the Rest as backward regions occupying a previous stage of development. In terms of this worldview, the area that has become Latin America has been variously depicted as both different and inferior at different times according to changing dominant typologies: as savage, primitive, backward, traditional, underdeveloped, developing, the Third World, emerging, failed—all different labels that identify it as less than, as living in what historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has called, for other postcolonial societies, “the waiting room of History.”<sup>14</sup> From this imperial perspective, Latin America is seen and sees itself as always catching up, never catching up, always not quite, permanently looking at history from the backstage, never sufficient, always never enough.<sup>15</sup>

In the twentieth century, particularly after the decolonization of European colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean following World War II, “modernization”—commonly understood as a process of

development through industrialization, urbanization, democratization, and secularization—became the key to achieving the long-cherished ideal of civilization. Like most nations in the Third World—a category created at that time—Latin American countries continued to seek modernity, despite efforts at originality or at being nonaligned, by pursuing one of two established models: capitalism, the familiar track of the First World, or socialism, the experimental trajectory of the Second World. But after a long battle between these antagonistic models, neither one achieved a real victory. At the end of the twentieth century, although actually existing socialism was defeated, capitalism's triumph has been shown to be pyrrhic. While this system has been a transformative historical force that has offered substantial benefits to large sectors and reduced poverty in some areas, it has done so at the expense of the exclusion of majorities and the degradation of the material foundations of humanity. Almost half the world's population is living under the poverty line; the wealthiest 20 percent consume 82.5 percent of all the riches on earth, while the poorest 20 percent live on 1.6 percent. Facing the bankruptcy of both models, Latin American cultural and political elites, as well as the population at large, long accustomed to viewing the present as a stage toward an ideal future, now confront the lack of guiding models; they face a crisis of futurity.

Now that History is back, the Left faces a similar future in all Latin American nations, even if embodied in different national dreams and under different political and economic conditions. Here I explore the gestalt of this future, this common “future form,” through five interrelated themes.

### *1. Agitated Present, Spectral Future*

I name this rubric “Agitated Present, Spectral Future” in order to evoke a modality of historicity, of being in the world, in which the future appears phantasmatic, as if it were a space inhabited by ghosts from the past and ideal dreams, and the present unfolds as a dense field of nervous agitation, constantly entangled in multiplying constraints, a conglomeration of contradictory tendencies and actions leading to no clear destination. Despite constant activity inspired by high hopes, despite even significant achievements, a nightmarish sensation of being trapped saturates the present, as if it were jammed or moved without advancing or in the wrong direction. Even when states manage to promote economic growth

and public welfare, the ideal future remains elusive, threatened by chronic problems and newly emerging obstacles.

Under this modality of historicity, the present time seems not only agitated but expansive; it prolongs itself within lasting constraints. While it occupies 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 homogeneous time that lies ahead but as the anticipated epoch of historical fulfillment. As this historical future is identified not with empty calendric time but with the meaningful time of fulfilled history, it comes to embody both renewed hopes and repeated deferrals. As if held back by recalcitrant circumstances, 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 (with significant exceptions, such as Brazil, whose independence was achieved by political means in 1822, when it became a monarchy, and Cuba, which became a US protectorate in 1898 after thirty years of war against Spain and was finally granted conditioned independence in 1902). Reflecting differences in political trajectories and goals, leftist regimes now have established more diverse foundational genealogies for the still heralded goal of “the second independence.”

In an insightful discussion of the turn to the left in Latin America, Claudio Lomnitz notes the tendency for all left regimes now to establish a particular foundational past for their current struggles: Evo Morales places it in Bolivia’s five hundred years of anticolonial resistance; Hugo Chávez defines it through the heroic leadership of Bolívar in the wars of independence (on occasion he looks to the sixteenth-century indigenous leader Guaicaipuro’s battle against the Spanish colonizers); Cuauhtemoc Cárdenas sees himself as continuing the struggle of his uncle Lázaro Cárdenas for social justice in Mexico; Michelle Bachelet hails Allende’s struggle for democratic socialism; Nestor Kirchner claims as his own Argentina’s Peronist culture; Lula links himself to Brazil’s transition to

democracy in 1983; and Tabare Vázquez highlights Uruguay's social-democratic legacy of the 1920s. Juxtaposing temporal scales and historical epochs, Lomnitz states,

Bolivia, Venezuela, Mexico, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Chile: 500 years, 200 years, 90 years, 80 years, 60 years, 40 years, 30 years. But also the pre-colonial era, the early republican moment, the popular regimes, and democratic socialism. These are some of the ghosts that haunt the new foundationalism.<sup>16</sup>

In the face of a history of partial achievements and constant deferrals, the ghosts of epic rebellions, revolutions, and republican nation-building continue to animate the ongoing process of nation-building—of constructing the nation and reconstructing its foundations. It is evident that the more varied repertoire of founding moments at this time reflects the Left's diverse nature. While the appeal to such founding moments may express an old political habit, its anxiously reiterative character reveals a distinctive anxiety concerning the future. In the past, claiming as foundational certain historical moments had served less to establish the basis for continuous development than to legitimate the ongoing pursuit of familiar goals in the face of continually deferred achievements. Despite more varied foundations now, a similar exchange between past glories and deferred triumphs is at work, except that now it is not just that the desired future remains unfulfilled but that its very being has become ethereal. Facing a groundless future, the Left must repeatedly ground itself in the past.

The invocation of a memorable past fixes certain times and places in the current national imaginary. This form of imagining the nation, by territorializing a history and historicizing a territory, helps frame the relation between past, present, and future.<sup>17</sup> As the uncertain long term shrinks, the short term expands, digging into the past to resurrect its icons and extending into the calendric future as it pushes the anticipated historical future beyond an ever-receding horizon. In a lucid discussion of the current turn to the left in Latin America, Boaventura de Sousa Santos notes the peculiar relation assumed at this time in Latin America between the short and long terms. Whereas the long term has historically been the horizon of the Left, the overwhelming dominance of capitalism has now restricted the domain of the Latin American Left to the short term.<sup>18</sup> Without clear alternative images of the future, its struggles must focus

on the here and now. According to him, this concentration on the short term also makes less relevant classical debates about reform and revolution. While he attributes this situation to a lack of integration between theory and praxis, I see it as reflecting also the extraordinary structural constraints within which the Left has emerged.<sup>19</sup>

In my view, these constraints have produced a rather peculiar articulation between practices and ideals in the short and long terms; 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. Thus we have 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. We must keep moving to stay on top, torn between the desire to find a secure footing for all and the instinct of self-preservation that compels individuals to desert collective projects. The ever-present talk of corruption within the current Left suggests that this tension leads many to use the language of the common good to conceal self-interested pursuits.

Of course, different countries embody this paradoxical historicity in different ways. Following my typology, while the VEBo countries (typified by Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia) more openly endorse socialism and promote policies associated with it, such as the nationalization of enterprises and constitutional reforms, BrAC countries (exemplified by Brazil, Argentina, and Chile) take more moderate positions and focus on redistributive policies and social reforms. Since an original leftist economic project cannot be equated either with nationalizations (reducing it to a form of state capitalism) or with redistributive policies (reducing it to a version of a social-democratic state), the task remains to develop a viable project for the long term. While VEBo countries seem to have more innovative political projects and BrAC countries appear to be following a rather familiar track, both groupings are still seeking to define an original path toward a postcapitalist future.<sup>20</sup> While these leftist states may be moving in that direction, their reliance on the pursuit of comparative advantages suggests that so far they have not been able to meet this fundamental challenge.

## *2. Beyond Reform and Revolution*

The rather familiar rhetoric of reform and revolution continues to be commonly employed in Latin America, even if it is increasingly unclear what these terms mean. In light of the typology I have proposed, it is evident that the VEBo countries—whose states control abundant mineral rents and are not the product of recent experiences of dictatorship—invoke more frequently the notions of revolution and of socialism. The BrAC nations—with diversified economies and coming from recent military dictatorships—follow the lead of Chile and Brazil in pursuing a politics of rhetorical moderation and class alliances.

During the twentieth century, “revolution” became the mantra of nationalist discourse. Revolution signified radical change. Most governments in Latin America, whether moderate or radical, claimed to be revolutionary. Often the label “revolution” was used not to promote but to contain radical change; the archetypical example of this usage is Mexico’s PRI, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (the Institutional Revolutionary Party), a party that took for itself the name of the Mexican revolution in order to domesticate its radical potential, making its oxymoronic name an apt descriptor of the party’s normalizing ethos.

For the radical Left, “revolution” has historically meant the overturning of the capitalist system; it has claimed revolution for itself, reform for all others. But since overturning capitalism requires conquering the state, “revolution” came to identify two processes and to have two distinct meanings: taking over the state through armed struggle and unleashing radical change from the state. As the Cuban revolution became the model of this view of “revolution,” one that was emulated in many countries in the 1960s, these two meanings were seen as part of one process. The military victory of the Sandinistas against the Somoza dynasty in 1979 and the electoral defeat of the Sandinista revolutionary regime a decade later seem to have closed this cycle of armed revolutionary struggle.

The Chilean model, under Salvador Allende (1971–73), proposed an alternative view: “revolution” not as the violent seizure of state power, which should be captured by electoral means, but as the radical transformation of society. During the current leftward turn, this view has become dominant. As the World Social Forum proposes, revolution, including the seizure of power, should be carried out by democratic means. In Mexico, the Zapatista movement began an armed uprising of symbolic dimensions

in 1994 but soon abandoned arms and made clear that its path was political struggle, in order not to seize the state but to create a space for a different kind of politics at the local and national level. On the basis of the Zapatista political project, which aims to change society by changing social relations without seizing the state, John Holloway has claimed that true revolutionary politics involves creating a new world by changing society from within, rather than through the state.

For most leftists, however, the state continues to be at the center of revolutionary politics. But even in this case, there is no common agreement about what makes politics radical. Chávez has converted the state into the main agent of the revolution, first through state-produced reforms inspired by a sui generis model of the Third Way and after 2005 through what he has called “Socialism of the twenty-first century.” But while the state is the main agent of revolutionary change in Venezuela, Chávez is the center of the state, unabashedly making its basic decisions and contradicting his own goal to promote “participatory democracy.” Just as in 2005 he proudly declared in Porto Alegre that he alone decided that Venezuela should be socialist, in 2007 he boasted that he single-handedly wrote the socialist-inspired constitutional reform that he presented to the National Assembly, the product, as he said, of his *puño y letra* (written in his own hand).

At the other end of the left political spectrum, in Chile, the Concertación governments have sought to achieve consensus on basic developmental goals. José Insulza, who served the Concertación government for ten years, calls this approach, one that avoids ideological labels and focuses on particular policies, “socialism by enumeration.” As he explained to me, “We prefer to focus on housing, education, health, and so on. We don’t need to use the label ‘socialism.’ We call this ‘socialism by enumeration.’”<sup>21</sup> This helps explain why President Michelle Bachelet could not transfer her great popularity (84 percent) to Eduardo Frei, the Concertación’s candidate, and why the election of conservative billionaire Sebastián Piñera in 2010 has been widely perceived as a more “efficient” way of continuing Chile’s “modernization,” rather than as a change of developmental models.

These differing strategies for change blur the boundaries between reform and revolution. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in Latin America now “there are reformist processes that seem revolutionary” (his

example is Venezuela under Chávez), “revolutionary processes that seem reformist” (his example is the Zapatista movement), and also “reformist processes that don’t even seem reformist” (his example is Brazil’s PT).<sup>22</sup> Independent of the validity of his examples, the point is that in the present context the concepts of reform and revolution, however indispensable in ideological struggles, have become increasingly inadequate as guides for action and as analytical categories.

One may read these circumstances as reflecting the closure of radical options but also as offering openings for new ways of imagining the ends and social logics of fundamental change. It is now less acceptable to justify questionable means in the name of superior ends. Instead, there is a growing demand to make everyday political actions correspond to ultimate values, to make the present prefigure the future. Democracy is increasingly valorized not as the protective shell of political life but as its foundation, not just as means of revolution but as its end. In tension with historicist teleologies, it is now more possible to imagine the present not as a stage toward history’s pre-ordained future but as its necessary ground, if not as the history we want, then as the history we have.

### *3. Beyond the Single Revolutionary Subject*

The recent turn to the left in Latin America has taken place through the actions of a rather large diversity of actors who have become recognized as icons of the “Left.” 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. While this is true for all countries during this turn, in VEBo countries certain sectors or individuals have assumed the main or sole leadership of the process, whereas in the BrAC countries the tendency has been to establish a politics of alliances among competing sectors.

In the past thirty years, as chronic and new problems proliferated in Latin America—in part resulting from the closing of protected enterprises, the expansion of informal economies, and severe migrations and displacements—there took place in Latin America a general disenchantment with traditional political parties and with politics itself. 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-descendant movements in Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru. While these movements have struggled for specific demands, such as land, work, and recognition, and have reactivated the existing political system, they have also challenged politics as usual. 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 (Workers' Party) in Brazil and the MAS (Movement Toward Socialism) in Bolivia. Although these parties have at their core a particular social sector (workers and coca growers, respectively), they are socially heterogeneous and do not regard this core as a universal class. They have come to power through multiclass alliances in both regional and national politics; it should be remembered that before Lula won Brazil's presidential election in 2002 through alliances with business sectors, the PT had won important regional electoral victories through broad political alliances, as in São Paulo and Porto Alegre.

The new leftist presidents, elected with the support of these movements and organizations, represent a wide range of personalities, social origins, and political experiences. Including two women, an indigenous leader, a trade-union organizer, a former priest, and a lower-class and low-ranking military officer, this set of presidents reflects an exceptionally broad spectrum of the Latin American population. 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 his critics). Since 2005, he has turned this division into a struggle to the 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).<sup>23</sup> 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 rejecting his earlier radical position as a Tupamaro leader (Tupamaros were an urban guerrilla organization active in the 1960s and 1970s) but maintaining the ideal of a just society.

While the search for a single revolutionary subject has declined, some leftists have transferred this role from the proletariat to the *pobretariado*, a

concept developed by Brazilian liberation theologian Frei Breto to refer to the largest sector of Latin America, the marginalized and excluded<sup>24</sup> (*pobretariado* is a clever play on words, as *pobre* in Spanish means “poor”). But the tendency in the region, particularly in BrAC countries, is to recognize a plurality of agents of change, as if there were an implicit agreement that changing the world now requires an alliance among all those who suffer hardships in the world. In all countries, in a context where the majority of the population is excluded from the formal economy, the exploitation of labor is no longer considered the main factor in the formation of revolutionary subjects. Alliances are now sought among subjects affected by multiple forms of domination, not just economic exploitation but also cultural and political subordination and discrimination.

New political actors now participate in and even define public debate in Latin America. For 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.”<sup>25</sup> Carlos de la Torre’s lucid analysis of new populisms in Latin America has illuminated specific tensions inhering in this “plural politics,” such as the conflict between the centralizing policies of Rafael Correa and the demands for autonomy of Ecuador’s indigenous communities.<sup>26</sup>

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 it has become possible to propose plurinationalism and interculturality as national ideals, particularly in Andean nations with large indigenous populations. These changes have expanded the domain of the political and brought into the public arena discussions about the legitimacy of cultural diversity that were previously confined to intellectual circles. The 2008 constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia define these nations as plurinational societies, grant multiple rights to their diverse communities, recognize the value of intercultural dialogue, and in the case of Ecuador, establish for the first time constitutional rights to nature as a political actor. During this turbulent period, competing principles and visions of life generate acute political tensions but also open politics to unprecedented possibilities.

#### 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, between what is said and what is meant. Current leftist politics in Latin America are certainly not exempt from this rather common form of deceptive political discourse. In any historical context, principled claims are at times contradicted by self-seeking practices. In neocolonial contexts, however, there are specific forms of double discourse that reflect the tension between formal national independence and international dependence. This tension generates “a double discourse of national identity that expresses and organizes the split between the appearance of national sovereignty and the continuing hold of international subordination.”<sup>27</sup> 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.

My concern here is not the sincerity of beliefs or their relation to practices but the specific structural relations that make it possible for conflicting beliefs and practices to coexist without necessarily reflecting bad faith or deception. 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.”<sup>28</sup> He sees this disjunction as a reflection of the lack of an alternative economic program. 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, for it is also rejected as an economic project for the future. This disjuncture is first between temporal frames and then between domains.

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 discourse formed by narratives that contradict each other but are all 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” (my translation). In an earlier statement, he had asserted, “We have many things to do before socialism” (*tenemos muchas cosas que hacer antes del socialismo*).<sup>29</sup> 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. This conflictual interplay between different temporal scales makes the present particularly agitated and murky; it is a space of creative undertakings but also of nefarious forms of duplicity and corruption. There is probably no more emblematic example of this mixture of immorality and deception than the discovery in Venezuela in June–July of 2010 of around four thousand containers with over one hundred thousand tons of imported food rotting all around the national ports, the result not just of ineptitude but of the profit-seeking actions of business networks operating at various levels of the Venezuelan state.

At the risk of simplifying a complex phenomenon, I suggest that the short and long terms are articulated differently in these countries. In VEBo countries, where socialist ideals are constantly proclaimed, there is a close articulation between the short and long terms in the political domain but a sharp disjuncture between them in the economic realm. In BrAC countries, where socialist ideals are understated, politics and economics tend to reinforce each other in the short term, pushing the long term toward an ever less visible future.

This double historical discourse expresses a perverse paradox. As I have already indicated, 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 has meant that, in practice, all Latin American 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.

This fundamental economic grounding threatens to erode the radical potential of the left turn and to make all states in Latin America, whether identified with the Left or the Right, converge around a set of rent-seeking economic policies. For example, Colombia, which had a relatively diversified export structure based on agricultural products, under conservative president Alvaro Uribe became a mining nation—oil and

minerals now represent over 60 percent of its total exports. While analysts generally place Brazil and Venezuela at opposite ends of the reformist and the revolutionary spectrum, these countries are equally intent on expanding oil production. Under Chávez, Venezuela has become ever more dependent on oil rents and on the imports of consumption goods. Under Lula, despite its rather dynamic economic structure, Brazil has continued to be a nation reliant on its vast natural resources, now magnified by newly discovered oil reserves. Chile, once the paradigmatic neoliberal model in Latin America, offers an instructive example: while the economy has indeed achieved significant rates of growth measured by conventional standards, this expansion has taken place at the cost of a skewed productive structure that relies on the exploitation of a few natural resources. As the 2010 election of Sebastian Piñera in Chile indicates, consensus among competing political parties around this economic foundation has diminished the difference between right and left policies. 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.

Still, since this double historical discourse is part of a plural discursive field, it is modified and challenged by other voices. This is a moment of heteroglossia. Some of these voices, including that of the state on occasion, propose models of the economy that are more ecologically sound and socially harmonious. While the proliferation of multiple voices in the political field may be confusing and conflictual, it offers the possibility of unexpected imaginings and original visions of the future.

### *5. Radical Democracy*

In the past, equality has been the key word in global struggles for democracy: the pursuit of equality of citizens before the law. Marxists have criticized bourgeois democracy as being universal in form but partial in content. As Marx argued, it is not enough to be equal before the law—a universal law that posits that no one can sleep under a bridge only affects those who have no proper housing. Socialist democracy has sought to move from formal equality toward substantial social equality. Yet the socialist democracy of actually existing socialisms has produced its own state-centered inequalities and has imposed a single voice on society.

The current struggles in Latin America build on the global achievements and limitations of bourgeois and socialist democracies. In some

respects, they represent a continuity of these past battles and reproduce familiar modes of power and conceptions of development. But 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. While their effects may be short-lived or be co-opted, the agency of new political actors and the force of new imaginaries have already changed the political scene in Latin America. This leftward turn has reactivated the public sphere and transformed politics itself.

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; in different ways, this has been the joint accomplishment of the various Latin American Lefts in all countries, both through domestic struggles and regional initiatives and institutions, such as ALBA, an alliance that seeks to counter the free-trade association. 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; as a “permanent democracy,” it has displaced “revolution” as the key term for the Left at this time.<sup>30</sup> While this achievement is the result of many struggles, perhaps its most significant expression has been the recognition of difference as a political principle. In many countries, particularly in VEB 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 different 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, from the Zapatistas in Mexico to those in the Andean nations. After a long century of homogenizing projects led by cultural and political elites who endorsed Western notions of progress, these movements have helped redefine the national imaginary, incorporating values of indigenous communities and conceptualizing the nation as plurinational community, as sanctioned in the new constitutions in Bolivia and Ecuador. Even in countries where the struggle for the recognition of difference has played a lesser role, as in Chile, Brazil, or Venezuela, the value of diversity has nevertheless changed the political field.

These struggles have expanded the agents, agendas, and conceptions of democracy. They draw strength from many local experiences. Just as no single social actor can now be represented as the agent of History without meeting significant resistance from other actors, no one conception of democracy can establish its hegemony without debate. The struggle *for* democracy now entails a struggle *about* democracy. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos has phrased it, political battles now pursue not an alternative to democracy but an alternative democracy.<sup>31</sup>

### The Currency of the Current

If in the past the Left claimed to have a monopoly on the future, now it can offer but uncertain images of the future. Yet this very lack has opened spaces for the imagination and experimentation. Although the future is not open, it offers openings. And although the final destination may not be clear, the sense of direction is: toward justice, equality, freedom, diversity, and social and ecological harmony. The Left has no map, but it has a compass.

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 seems to be shifting toward the right. A critical election suggests a change of direction: the victory of billionaire Sebastian Piñera in Chile in 2010, despite Michelle Bachelet's 84-percent popularity. Even Fidel Castro, certainly an astute observer and one not prone 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.”<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, 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 move. In Latin America, as in Europe, opponents of the Left now frequently endorse many of the Left's principles and policies. As Steven Erlander reported in the *New York Times*,

Europe's center-right parties have embraced many ideas of the left: generous welfare benefits, nationalized health care, sharp restrictions on carbon emissions, the ceding of some sovereignty to the European Union. But they have won votes by promising to deliver more efficiently than the left, while working to lower taxes, improve financial regulation, and grapple with aging populations.”

He cites historian Michel Winockas, who argues that “the use of Socialist ideas . . . ha[s] become mainstream” by leaders, such as Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Germany’s Angela Merkel, “who condemn the excesses of the ‘Anglo-Saxon model’ of capitalism while praising the protective power of the state.”<sup>33</sup> In Latin America, the opposition to the Left now has also embraced its fundamental principles. While clearly there remain antagonistic poles in politics that reflect profound social inequalities and ideological differences, the boundaries between the traditional “Right” and “Left” are less sharp. In Latin America, it would be hard to be elected now—and to remain in power—without recognizing *el pueblo* as sovereign and paying more than nominal attention to the increasingly diverse demands of the popular sectors for which the Left has fought.

Some of these demands are very basic and could be addressed by governments of different political orientations, but others are quite radical. Although some of the most utopian demands may be unrealistic at this time, 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.”<sup>34</sup> Recently, philosopher Alain Badiou has argued for the need to reach for what seems impossible. Given that capitalism, understood as a self-expanding system propelled by profit maximization, 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. He responds to this need by proposing what he calls “the communist hypothesis.” For him, this hypothesis is not a utopian ideal but a set of “intellectual practices always actualized in a different fashion” in diverse historical situations. In another register, he also presents this hypothesis as “what Kant called an idea with a regulatory function, not a programme.”<sup>35</sup> It is significant that for Badiou this hypothesis has been

present in fragmentary form in struggles for equality since antiquity but need not be identified with any model from the past, including those that have claimed to embody the communist ideal.

It is this historical dimension that Slavoj Žižek regards as essential. While enthusiastically endorsing Badiou's core argument, he rejects the notion of the communist hypothesis as a Kantian regulative idea and emphasizes its "precise reference to a set of actual social antagonisms which generate the need for communism."<sup>36</sup> As if echoing Weber, for Žižek this entails constant struggle, moving beyond models that have not worked and fighting to realize new ones, "again and again."<sup>37</sup> From a rather different theoretical perspective but following a similar radical impulse, David Harvey offers in the appendix to *Spaces of Hope* a boldly imaginative image of what one such model of a just and egalitarian society could look like based on cooperative forms of production and more flexible arrangements of work, family, and residence.<sup>38</sup>

#### Embers of the Past, Poetry of the Future

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that during this leftward turn the reiterative appeal to icons from the past is a symptom that reveals anxiety over an uncertain future and the desire to provide a stable foundation for an agitated present. Yet the appeal to past icons, when it arises organically from ongoing struggles toward a better world, may also express their lasting significance as vital embodiments of ideals of justice and equality. It is in this sense that Javier Sanjinés has used the notion of "embers of the past" to evoke history's capacity to energize and illuminate present struggles: "Embers' is, above all, a concept of sociocultural temporality: the persistence in the present of 'embers of the past,' buried, flickering, but still capable of igniting new conflagrations."<sup>39</sup> In the introduction to Sanjinés's book, Xavier Albó comments that the image offered by Sanjinés is more apt than Walter Benjamin's notion of "ruins," for "it refers to embers covered by ashes that never were really extinguished and which new winds will make burn again with vigor."<sup>40</sup> Although this is an acute observation, Benjamin viewed the past not just as ruins but as traditions that must be rescued, saved for present struggles. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, his conception of the dialectic involves not just the

two familiar moments of negation and supercession (as the transcendence of negation in synthesis) but also the neglected notion of “saving.” As she puts it, “the verb *aufheben* has a third meaning as well. It is the German expression for ‘to keep, to save,’ as in saving a material trace, a memento of the past. I would like for us to keep, to save *this* meaning. It bears affinities with Walter Benjamin’s idea of *rescuing* the past.”<sup>41</sup> In a similar spirit, the notion of “embers” is used by Sanjinés to recognize how the past can be awakened in the present in order to rescue the future.

Still, it is not clear how past flames can be made to endure and to illuminate present struggles. In a stern analysis of the crisis of modernity in the Global South, David Scott argues that the emancipatory struggles of the past provide inadequate models for the impasses of the postcolonial present.<sup>42</sup> In dialogue with Scott, Gary Wilder revisits the conceptual worlds of thinkers associated with the “Negritude” movement and demonstrates the value of inhabiting their untimely thoughts and exploring their ongoing relevance. Building on insights on “reified objects, emancipatory potentiality and historical temporality” in the work of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Ernst Bloch, Wilder makes a compelling case for examining “futures that were once imagined but never came to be, alternative futures that might have been and whose not yet realized emancipatory possibilities may now be recognized and reawakened as durable and vital legacies.”<sup>43</sup>

The quest for sources of emancipatory imaginings was one of Marx’s central concerns. While he was intent on freeing radical imaginings from the burden of the past, he recognized the past’s capacity to illuminate present struggles. In his examination of the revolutions of the nineteenth century, his call for a poetry drawn from the future was not meant to discard the past, only to open the future to radical novelty. For him, the past could be brought to life 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 of the nineteenth century did so for “parodying the old” and for “fleeing from [the task’s] solution in reality.”<sup>44</sup>

Carried along by winds of history that fan old flames and rouse new struggles, Latin America has become a diverse fabric of collective utopian dreams. The dialogue between past and future informing current struggles

has, despite constraints, challenged place-bound, parochial conceptions of universality and has generated global exchanges about reimagined worlds. The search for equality goes beyond the struggle against forms of domination based on region, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, race, or age. Particularly in the Andean region, indigenous movements are proposing to move from anthropocentric struggles toward biocentrism as an expression of a planetary universality. As a result of recent struggles, it is now more possible in Latin America to value difference 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. Perhaps it has also become possible to engage different cosmologies, to recognize particulars in universals and universals in particulars, and to be open to the call “to see a World in a grain of sand, / And a Heaven in a wild flower.”<sup>45</sup>

Of course, given the unequal structures of power within which this leftward turn has taken place, it is possible that its new imaginings 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 and sheer global survival, it is likely that a counterpoint between the embers of the past and the poetry of the future will continue to conjure up images of worlds free from the horrors of history.<sup>46</sup> Politics will remain a battle of desires waged on an uneven terrain. But as long as people find themselves without a safe and dignified home in the world, utopian dreams will continue to proliferate, energizing struggles to build a world made of many worlds, where people can dream their futures without fear of waking up.

Notes to Chapter 9

My gratitude to Julie Skurski, Genese Sodikoff, Katherine Verdery, John French, Talal Asad, Craig Calhoun, and students in my Spring 2010 Seminar at CUNY's Graduate Center, as well as to an anonymous reader from the SSRC; their suggestions about content and form have considerably improved this chapter.

1. Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 259. By these terms, Koselleck explores the relationship between historical experience and expectations of the future. Scholars have shown that conceptions of history and cultural cosmologies are intimately connected to each other and are historically specific; in any given society, the relationship between present and future establishes distinctive temporalities and narratives of history. Despite persuasive critiques of Eurocentrism, canonical scholarly categories tend to reproduce Western assumptions about temporality and visions of history. While in sympathy with these critiques, I deploy here the familiar trilogy of "past," "present," and "future" as it has been commonly used in studies about Latin America, as well as in Latin America itself, my use of this trilogy is largely descriptive, restricting my critical intent to making visible assumed or naturalized conceptions of history and of space/time.

2. Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, trans. Allan Cameron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

3. This comment reflects my own evaluation and position (and wishes) but is indebted to the fundamental work of members of a loose "decolonial" collective, or network, without a proper name or single position; for recent works on this topic by members of this collective, see the recent thoughtful texts of Arturo Escobar and Javier Sanjinés. Escobar, "Latin America at a Crossroads," *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 1–65; and Sanjinés, *Rescaldos del pasado: Conflictos culturales en sociedades post-coloniales* (La Paz: PIEB, 2009).

4. Atilio A. Boron, "Globalization: A Latin American Perspective," *Estudos Sociedade e Agricultura* 11 (1998).

5. John French, "Understanding the Politics of Latin America's Plural Lefts (Chávez/Lula): Social Democracy, Populism and

Convergence on the Path to a Post-Neoliberal World,” *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2009): 362.

6. Jorge Castañeda, “A Tale of Two Lefts,” *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 2006.

7. Arturo Escobar’s discussion, in “Latin America at a Crossroads,” of the turn to the left in Latin America focuses on these countries, in part because they seem to represent a more radical rupture from the past and a “decolonial” political project.

8. 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.

9. Leonardo Avritzer, “El ascenso del Partido de los Trabajadores en Brasil,” 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), 67–96.

10. César Rodríguez Garavito and Patrick Barrett, “La utopía revivida?” in Rodríguez Garavito, Barrett, and Chávez, *La nueva izquierda*, 40.

11. Fernando Coronil, “After Empire: Rethinking Imperialism from the Americas,” in *Imperial Formations and Their Discontents*, ed. Ann Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter Purdue (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2007), 241–74.

12. Susana Rotker, *Bravo pueblo: Poder, utopía y violencia* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial La Nave Va, 2005), 85.

13. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

14. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

15. This mode of historicizing has been observed in Latin America by literary and political elites since the nineteenth century, including by such “founders” of Latin American nationalism as Simón Bolívar and José Martí. Chakrabarty has productively used the notion of the “not-yet” in his insightful critique of historicism. *Ibid.*

16. Claudio Lomnitz, “The Latin American Rebellion: Will the New Left Set a New Agenda?” *Boston Review*, September–October 2006.

17. I have discussed elsewhere Nicos Poulantzas’s insight that nation formation involves the territorialization of a history and the historicization

of a territory. Fernando Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism: Towards Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (1996): 51–87.

18. While this observation is accurate for recent periods in Latin American history, it must be noted that liberal thought has also claimed the future as its own. The very notion of the "long term" was created by Alfred Marshall in his *Principles of Economics* (London: Macmillan, 1890) to identify a time when the market would adjust all factors and define normal prices; for an elaboration of this point, see the interesting discussion of the public rhetoric of macroeconomics in Jane Guyer, "Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical and Punctuated Time," *American Anthropologist* 34, no. 3 (2007): 409–21.

19. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Una izquierda con futuro," in Rodríguez Garavito, Barrett, and Chávez, *La nueva izquierda*, 437–57.

20. I use the notion of postcapitalism here as a rather vague term to evoke a hypothetical future society built on the foundations of capitalism but transcending its limitations.

21. José Insulza, interview with the author, University of Michigan, October 2006.

22. Santos, "Una izquierda con futuro," 438–39. Author's translation.

23. 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.

24. Marcelo Colussi, "El pobretariado: Un nuevo sujeto revolucionario?" *Revista Amauta*, 2009.

25. Marisol de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 334, 356.

26. Carlos de la Torre, "Correa y los Indios," *Diario Hoy*, March 6, 2010.

27. Julie Skurski and Fernando Coronil, "Country and City in a Colonial Landscape: Double Discourse and the Geopolitics of Truth in Latin America," in *View from the Border: Essays in Honor of Raymond Williams*, ed. Dennis Dworkin and Leslie Roman (New York: Routledge, 1993), 25.

28. Atilio Borón, "Globalization: A Latin American Perspective."

29. Daniel Chávez, “Del frente amplio a la nueva mayoría,” in Rodríguez Garavito, Barrett, and Chávez, *La nueva izquierda*, 172. Author’s translation.

30. 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), 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.

31. Santos, “Una izquierda con futuro.”

32. 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&view=article&id=5799:reflections-by-fidel-castro-obama-a-science-fiction-story&catid=146:opinion&Itemid=383](http://csmenetwork.com/2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5799:reflections-by-fidel-castro-obama-a-science-fiction-story&catid=146:opinion&Itemid=383).

33. Steven Erlander, “European Socialists Suffering Even in Downturn,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2009.

34. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 225.

35. Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review* 49 (2008).

36. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), 87–88.

37. *Ibid.*, 86–104.

38. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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

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

41. Susan Buck-Morss, “The Second Time as Farce . . . Historical Pragmatics and the Untimely Present” (unpublished paper, 2010), 16–17.

42. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

43. Gary Wilder, "Untimely Vision: Aimé Césaire, Decolonization, Utopia," *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 103.

44. Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 17.

45. William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*, lines 1–2.

46. The notion of a counterpoint between past and future is inspired by Fernando Ortiz's redemptive counterpoint between the Americas and Europe through the tropes of tobacco and sugar in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). "Poetry of the future" is my phrase drawn from Marx's argument that, unlike the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century, the social revolutions of the nineteenth century must "draw their poetry from the future." Marx, *18th Brumaire*, 18.