The End of Progressive Hegemony and the Regressive Turn in Latin America: The End of a Cycle?

written by Massimo Modonesi | January 13, 2016

We offer the following translation in the wake of the legislative elections in Venezuela on December 6, 2015 which saw the right-wing Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) decisively seize control of the National Assembly from the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), and the recent election to the Argentine presidency of conservative candidate Mauricio Macri, formerly the neoliberal mayor of Buenos Aires, who defeated the Kirchnerist candidate Daniel Scioli, a figure himself on the Right of Peronism. The present essay by Massimo Modonesi was written prior to those events, but it grapples with a question that has only become more pressing in their aftermath: Whither Latin America?

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The experience of the so-called progressive governments in Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Uruguay and Venezuela) seem two have entered a critical phase which some authors have called *the end of a cycle*, opening up a debate on the character of the regional conjuncture with important strategic implications for the immediate future.1 I will defend, in a synthetic way, the idea that, in a strict sense, the cycle has not ended, nor is it nearing its end in the short term, understanding by cycle the period of the exercise of government of progressive forces; at the same time, however, we can and must identify and analyze the close of the hegemonic phase of this cycle, with the consequences that this implies for the medium term.

To do this we begin with the characterization of the progressive Latin American cycle as a totality of different versions of *passive revolution* – that is, following the intuition of Gramsci, a series of processes of significant but limited structural transformations, with a conservative undertone, pushed forward from above and through demobilizing and subordinating political practices.2 These are expressed principally through the devices of *caesarism* and *transformism* as modalities of emptying out, from top to bottom, channels of popular organization, participation and protagonism.3 Passive revolution is a formula that seeks and achieves a hegemonic exit to a situation of an equilibrium of forces, or a "catastrophic equilibrium" – a formula reflected in the experience of Latin American progressivism in the decade of the 2000s. We can analyze the current moment through this lens in order to problematize and deepen our understanding of the hypothesis of the end of the cycle, by highlighting a central and determining feature of the conjuncture: the

relative loss of hegemony, which is to say the growing incapacity to build and sustain a broad cross-class consensus, and strong popular roots, both of which characterized the earlier stage of consolidation of these governments.

In effect, the phase of hegemonic consolidation, which was repeatedly expressed in the results of elections and plebiscites, appears to have ended. That phase was forged fundamentally through the effective exercise of a series of state- and party- mediations, displacing the right from strategic institutional lymph nodes and ideological apparatuses of the state, and installing in their place a series of idea-forces, slogans, and political values of a national-popular character, such as sovereignty, nationalism, progress, development, social justice, redistribution, and plebeian dignity, among others. In some countries, this phase was accompanied by a direct confrontation with attempts at conservative restoration, either through coup attempts or other extra-institutional forms – as in the cases of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, but also in Argentina during the recent agrarian conflict. The outcomes of these attempts left the right-wing of these countries deeply weakened and, as a consequence, opened up a path toward a more profound and far-reaching hegemonic practice of the progressive governments, including the reformulation of constitutional frameworks and in so doing the generation of the scenario for the so-called "epoch of change."4

This phase seems to have definitively ended. At least since 2013, a point of inflection is perceptible, with certain temporal and formal variations across different countries, a shift from a more progressive profile to one tendentially more regressive.5 This turn is particularly evident in the most recent period in the budgetary responses to the economic crisis that is plaguing the region, which privilege capital at the cost of labor and the environment. It is also evident in the attitude assumed by these governments in relation to social movements situated to their left. The regressive turn has tended to harden discursively and materially with time, as in the case of repressive measures adopted against recent mobilizations in Ecuador.

Gramsci maintained that one can and must distinguish between progressive and regressive caesarisms. I would add that this antinomy is also an interpretive key which can be applied to the analysis of diverse forms and distinct phases of passive revolutions, since it allows us to recognize diverse combinations and progressive and regressive features, and the predominance of either one of these in successive moments of the historical process.6

From the beginning, diverse tendencies have coexisted inside of the blocs and social and political alliances that have supported progressive Latin American governments. If in the initial phase the progressive features dominated, contributing to their denomination as progressive, one can identify a later tendential conservative turn which operates in a regressive sense with respect to the earlier progressive features of the hegemonic phase in the exercise of power by the progressive governments. This change in direction manifests itself organically in the heart of the blocs and alliances which sustain these governments, and expresses itself further in the orientation of public policies, justifying itself, from the optic of the defense of positions of power, due to the necessity to compensate for the loss of transversal hegemony through a movement toward the Centre.

This centrism, incidentally, would seem to contrast with the logic of Left-Right and people-oligarchy polarizations which characterized the emergence of these governments, supported by the eruption of strong anti-neoliberal movements and the later confrontations with the conservative restoration attempts by the Right that opened up doors for hegemonic consolidation. At the same time, if we follow the hypothesis of Maristella Svampa of a return of populist devices, a real, organic and political movement toward the Centre does not exclude the use of confrontational rhetoric, typical of the populist format; although, tendentially, this would have to, and probably will, be moderated in the interests of greater coherence between form and content.7

In any case, we are witnessing a fundamental, historical, and structural turn in the political composition of these governments, and, therefore, of a significant period in the political history of contemporary Latin America.

The slide towards a regressive profile is more noticeable in some countries (Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador) than in others (Venezuela, Bolivia, and Uruguay), since in the latter cases the social and political blocs of progressive power has remained relatively intact; strong cleavages have not opened up to the Left, and the Right remains relatively weak (except in the uncertain Venezuelan scenario where this assessment is debatable). Although the molecular displacements at the level of social and political alliances, the influences of classes and class fractions and social and political groups, and their counterpart in the reorientation of public policy, are the foundational phenomena of the period, we will mention here, as an example – for reasons of space and because of the objective difficulty in realizing such a complicated analysis in all of these areas at the scale of Latin America – only some of the most visible reflections in the sphere of political parties and leaderships.

In Argentina, the conservative turn is quite evident in the candidacy of Daniel Scioli in the Frente para la Victoria (Front for Victory, FpV), someone who is not, to use an Argentine expression, a Kirchnerist in his kidneys (*del riñon kirchnerista*), in contrast with the Vice presidential candidate Carlos Zannini, who had sanctioned an adjustment of the Peronist "miniature political system" (using an expression of historian Juan Carlos Torre) toward the Centre-Right which was set in motion in the final years of the gradual weakening of Kirchnerism.8

In Brazil, it has been some time since various authors began to signal a genetic mutation, aside from the scandals of corruption, in the interior of the Workers Party (PT). The sociologist Francisco "Chico" de Oliveira identified it in the emergence of the *ornitorrinco*, a hybrid figure, part trade unionist, part financial speculator, installed in the management of immense pension funds which navigate the financial markets.9 In this sense, the possible return of Lula would not substantially modify the political orientation assumed by Dilma, in the same way that no change of orientation occurred when she replaced him; the turn toward the Centre has manifested itself in the conjuncture above all through the diminution of social spending in comparison to the persistent direct and indirect support to the process of capital accumulation.

The same tendency has appeared in the Ecuadorian case since the displacement of sectors of the Left internal to the Alianza País (Country Alliance, AP) party and the selection of Jorge Glas, clearly identified with the private sector, as the vice presidential candidate to run alongside Correa in the 2013 elections.10

In Uruguay, the regression is evident at the ideological level in the change of leadership from Pepe Mujica to Tabaré Vázquez, who reflects the internal and external equilibriums of the Frente Amplia (Broad Front, FA), which are moving toward the Right, although with a certain continuity of a stable political force and a defined project. At the same time, this movement has only very recently begun to reflect on events and concrete situations that seem to point in the direction of a loss of hegemony and the awakening of social and political oppositions.11

In relation to the Andean cases – Bolivia and Ecuador – Maristella Svampa points out a rupture with previous commitments which could sanction "the loss of the emancipatory dimension of politics and the evolution toward models of domination of a traditional kind, based in the cult of leadership and identification with the state."12

In the case of Bolivia, in spite of the emergence of an "Aymara bourgeoisie" and the bureaucratization and institutionalization of broad sectors of the leaderships of the social movements that led the anti-neoliberal struggles, the shift toward the Centre is less visible in terms

of the political composition of the power bloc. At the same time, the theme of the re-election of Evo and a possible referendum on this, opens up a delicate scenario, in spite of the fact that solid electoral alternatives from the Right have not been consolidated. The Right, apart from some local results, still has not reared its head, and the Movimiento Sin Miedo (Movement Without Fear, MSM) has not been able to expand on its solid rootedness in the capital city of La Paz (the MSM achieved less than 3% in the 2014 national elections).13

These regressive tendencies are still less evident in Venezuela, the only country where the generalized participation of the subaltern classes has been pushed forward through the configuration of the communes since 2009, in spite of the fact that this decentralizing development was balanced with the almost simultaneous creation of the Partido Socialista Unificado de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), as an organ of centralization, and as the political arm of Chavismo. On the other hand, the exacerbated polarization by the Right has tended to compress the popular camp behind leadership groups of the Bolivarian Revolution, in spite of particularly fragile economic circumstances that do not allow a deepening of the process, generate internal tensions, and eventually could strengthen the most conservative tendency within Chavismo.14

Reflected in these national differences is the greater or lesser influence of a reactivation of a social, and/or political, opposition of the Left. In effect, it is important to note how in the majority of these countries, in addition to the relative recovery of right wing forces, we have been witnessing over the last few years a rebound of protest on the part of popular actors, organizations, and movements, which highlights the return of an antagonistic and autonomous profile of these movements as a counterweight to their earlier subordination within the passive revolutions. Regrettably, however, due to their newness, and the absence of organizational consistency and political articulation, there does not appear to be a scenario in which Latin American politics could shift to the Left in the immediate horizon. Indeed, in spite of a slow recovery of autonomy and capacity for struggle, we have not seen widespread and important processes of the political accumulation of forces over the last few years, since the loss of hegemony of progressivism, except possibly in the case of the Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores (Workers' Left Front, FIT) in Argentina, whose perspectives and potential expansion are also not guaranteed.15 The explosion of protests in Ecuador over the last several months have put forward several demands of distinct sectors, but in spite of the accumulated discontent of popular sectors, and in particular of indigenous movements and organized workers, this does not guarantee the strengthening of an alternative political pole of attraction.16

This difficulty is partially due to the ebb that followed the ascendant wave of anti-neoliberal struggles, as popular sectors adapted to a political culture of clientelism; on the other hand, and more importantly, this ebb was a product of the initiatives, or lack of initiatives, of progressive governments that were more interested in building electoral support, and to guarantee governability without social conflicts, than in pushing forward, or simply respecting, the antagonistic and autonomous dynamics of popular organization, and the construction of channels and forms of participation and self-determination. These would have been necessary in order to deeply transform the life conditions, and not only the capacity of consumption, of the subaltern classes.

This weakness, or absence of empowerment, suggests that the pacifying intention which operated as a counterpart to the structural transformations and redistributive policies (without considering here the problematic extractivist and primary-export continuity in the economies) provoked a decade of loss in terms of the accumulation of political force from below, seen from the vantage point of the autonomous capacity of popular sectors, in contradistinction to their ascendancy that marked the nineties and that broke neoliberal hegemony, opening up the current historical scenario.

This negative balance is what impedes, for the moment, the ability to deal with the double movement to the Right – that is, the relative strengthening of the political Right and the internal conservative

and regressive turn which has modified the equilibriums and political orientations of the power blocs which sustain the progressive Latin American governments.

At the same time, the end of progressive hegemony does not appear to imply an immediate risk of the restoration of the Latin American Right, as sometimes is predicted as a means of blackmailing the Left. The various Rights are just beginning to recuperate from their major losses in the 2000s, and as an indication of the impact of progressive hegemony, they are incorporating ideas and principles that do not correspond to the neoliberal ideal.17 This is a demonstration of the fact that the cycle of anti-neoliberal struggles of the nineties and the governments that declared themselves post-neoliberal, have displaced certain pillars of common sense and have indeed provoked a relative change of epoch in terms of the political and cultural agenda and debate.

In conclusion, in these convulsive times, the course of the Latin American passive revolutions continue, surrounded by a growing opposition on the Right and Left, and characterized internally by their own conservative and regressive turn; they are sliding dangerously down a slope in which they are losing their hegemonic luster, demonstrating the possible beginning to an extended end of the cycle, a process of ending with variable and indeterminate duration.

– *Translated by Jeffery R. Webber*

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1. I do not include Honduras and Paraguay, which, under the governments of Zelaya and Lugo, for a short period before the so-called "white coups," were part of the "cycle," nor Peru, because the government of Ollanta Humala did not exhibit a sufficiently clear or sustained progressive moment. I also do not include Chile because of the neoliberal profile of the governments of the previous Concertación and, more recently, of the New Majority led by Bachelet. Apart from their characterization, these governments are chronologically out of step with the processual temporality and resurgence of the conjunctural cycle. For a measured assessment see Franck Gaudichaud, "¿Fin de ciclo en América del Sur? Los movimientos populares, la crisis de los 'progresismos' gubernamentales y las alternativas ecosocialistas," in *América Latina. Emancipaciones en construcción*(Santiago: Tiempo Robado Editoras/América en movimiento, 2015). It is important to highlight that the notion of "the end of the cycle" is exacerbating an already polarized debate. Some organic intellectuals of Latin American progressivism reacted by unconditionally defending the achievements of the governments and vehemently denouncing the hypothesis for being, according to them, the work of a marginal ultra-Left. For example, Emir Sader," ¿El final de un cicle (que no existió)?" *Página 12*, Buenos Aires, September 17, 2015. This position, which simplifies and polarizes the criticisms as ultra-Leftist is also advanced by the Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linera, combining it with the environmental question, beginning with the TIPNIS conflict in Bolivia that began in 2010 and extending it to the recent period by accusing NGOs of being "Green Trotskyists," acting in collusion with foreign interests.
2. Massimo Modonesi, "Revoluciones pasivas en América Latina. Una aproximación gramsciana a la caracterización de los gobiernos progresistas de inicio de siglo," in *Horizontes Gramscianos. Estudios en torno al pensamiento de Antonio Gramsci* (Mexico: FCPyS-UNAM, 2013).
3. See Massimo Modonesi, "Revoluciones pasivas en América Latina. Una aproximación gramsciana a la caracterización de los gobiernos progresistas de inicio de siglo" in *El Estado en América Latina: continuidades y rupturas*, ed. Mabel Thwaites Rey (Santiago de Chile: CLACSO-ARCIS, 2012).
4. The Vice President of Bolivia, Álvaro García Linera, spoke of the "point of bifurcation" in order to capture this strategic phase in the correlation of forces which opened up the possibility for hegemonic rule. See Álvaro García Linera, "Empate catastrófico y punto de

bifurcación," *Crítica y emancipación,* núm. 1, CLACSO, Buenos Aires, June 2008. The notion of a *change of epoch* emerged from an expression of the Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa who in 2007 argued that what was happening was not "an epoch of changes, but rather a change of epoch." This idea was taken up in the title of ALAS Congress in Guadalajara that year, where I presented a text accepting and developing the theme. It was later published as Massimo Modonesi, "Crisis hegemónica y movimientos antagonistas en América Latina. Una lectura gramsciana del cambio de época," *A Contracorriente* 5, no. 2, 2008. Simultaneously, Maristella Svampa – with whom I developed a fruitful dialogue at this conference – published a book whose title contributed to the wider diffusion of this notion within the sphere of academic debate. Maristella Svampa, *Cambio de época. Movimientos sociales y poder politico* (Buenos Aires: CLASCO-Siglo XXI, 2008).

5. As suggested in Massimo Modonesi, "Conflictividad socio-política e inicio del fin de la hegemonía progresista en América Latina," in *Anuario del conflicto social 2013*, eds. Jaime Pastor and Nicolás Rojas Pedemonte (Barcelona: Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 2014).
6. See Massimo Modonesi, "Pasividad y subalternidad. Sobre el concepto de*revolución pasiva* de Antonio Gramsci," in *Gramsciana. Rivista Internazionale de Studi su Antonio Gramsci*, no.1, Turin, 2015.
7. Maristella Svampa, "América Latina: de nuevas izquierdas a populismos de alta intensidad," *Memoria*, no. 256, November 2015.
8. Mabel Thwaites, "Argentina fin de ciclo," in *Memoria*, no. 254, May 2015.
9. Massimo Modonesi, Entrevista a Francisco De Oliveira, "Brasil: una hegemonía al revés," *OSAL*, no. 30, November 2011.
10. Francisco Muñoz Jaramillo, ed., *Balance crítico del correísmo*, Quito: Universidad Central del Ecuador, 2014.
11. Raúl Zibechi has pointed out very concrete and tangible expressions of this in recent mobilizations against the free trade and services agreement, TISA. Raúl Zibechi, "Diez días que sacudieron a Uruguay," *La Jornada*, September 18, 2015.
12. Maristella Svampa, "Termina la era de las promesas andinas," *Revista Ñ, Clarín*, August 25, 2015.
13. Pablo Stefanoni, "¿Perdió Evo Morales?" *Revista Panamá*, April 9, 2015.
14. Edgardo Lander, "Venezuela: ¿crisis terminal del modelo petrolero rentista?"*Aporrea.org*, October 30, 2014.
15. Pablo Stefanoni, "El voto trotsko explicado a un finlandés," *Revista Panamá*, July 24, 2015.
16. Massimo Modonesi, "Entrevista a Alberto Acosta, ¿Fin de ciclo de los gobiernos progresistas en América Latina? Límites y crisis del correísmo en Ecuador"*Memoria*, no. 256, November, 2015; Jeffery R. Webber, "Ecuador: en el impasse político" *Viento Sur*, September 20, 2015.
17. See the symposium in the journal *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 254, on "Los rostros de la derecha en América Latina," November-December, 2014, and in particular the articles by Fernando Molina on Bolivia and Franklin Ramírez and Valeria Coronel on Ecuador.

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