Latin America: A Resurgent Left?

written by John L. Hammond | June 24, 2009

LEFTISTS WON PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 2006 across Latin America: starting (at the end of 2005) with the stunning victory of Evo Morales in Bolivia, through the election of Socialist Michele Bachelet in Chile, the predictable reelection of Lula in Brazil and Hugo Chàvez in Venezuela (though Lula, winning less than 50 percent of the vote in the first round, was forced into a runoff), and the runoff victory of Rafael Correa in Ecuador. An ambiguous leftist, the Sandinista Daniel Ortega, won the presidency in Nicaragua, and another, Ollanta Humala, was defeated in Peru, but only after winning a place in a runoff. Andrés Manuel Lòpez Obrador was narrowly defeated in a questionable election in Mexico. The winners joined incumbents Néstor Kirchner in Argentina and Tabaré Vàsquez in Uruguay to form the largest contingent of Latin American presidents calling themselves leftist in many years, probably ever. These victories have been hailed (and denounced) as representing a leftist resurgence in Latin America. While they do signal an important change in direction, this article is a caution against exaggerated hopes. I will argue that while all are on the left, there are great differences between the lefts of different countries and an even greater gulf separating them from the left of the past. These differences render moot any expectation of a common outcome. Many from outside Latin America have too readily assumed that past popular upheavals promised a dramatic change in domestic policies and the hemispheric balance of power, and some see the same promise today. In order to understand both the prospects and the limits of the recent left successes, we must put them in perspective. All these newly elected presidents, to one degree or another, owe their victories to a broad repudiation by their electorates of the neoliberalism prevailing in most of Latin America in the last two decades; most of them stand up against U.S. influence in the hemisphere.[1]But their politics are quite diverse. Some, like Lula, Bachelet, and Vàsquez, submit to the pressures of the United States and the international financial institutions, voluntarily restricting their domestic policy options. Others, especially Chàvez and Morales, have promised a major reordering of their social and economic systems and resisted the domination of international capital. Others are less clearly identifiable: Kirchner falls in between these positions, and Correa is too new in office to be categorized. These differences call into question the meaning of “left” in Latin America at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In my view, the term “left” must be defined in historically specific terms: the definition depends on the prevailing political conditions at any time. Even if the goals are common across time, historical changes in the political economy and international politics of the region and the world force a reassessment of the political programs that are feasible in a given conjuncture. Further, the definition must be geographically specific, taking into account the domination of the United States over the whole region. It is not just Mexico that is “so far from God, so near to the United States.” To be “left” in the Latin American context means to reject the historical subordination of the region to the United States by asserting independence either within an individual country or in a pan-American anti-U.S. nationalism. Three dimensions of leftism are particularly relevant: rejection of neoliberal economic policies; responsiveness to social movements demanding economic and social benefits for the poor and excluded; and defense of national independence and continental solidarity in opposition to the hegemony of the United States. The most important element in the program of the left, common over time and between countries, has been opposition to inequality. Latin America is the region of the world with the greatest degree of economic inequality—not the poorest, but with the greatest disparity between the poor and the rich. Inequality, severe since the colonial period, is sustained in the present by a range of official and informal practices. The political system has always worked against the interests of the poor. In the mid- twentieth century, different lefts promoted two main routes to greater equality, armed revolution, and import substitution industrialization (ISI). Each had both domestic and international implications. The revolutionary option did not succeed,

except in Cuba and (temporarily) Nicaragua. ISI, intended to overcome subordination to northern commercial interests and to expand the internal market, promoted the growth of a relatively strong organized working class and fostered the belief in an active state to promote economic growth, embodied in political projects as diverse as the structuralism promoted by the United Nations' Economic Commission for Latin America and the Cuban revolution.

The World Has Changed

TODAY NEITHER STATE-LED DEVELOPMENT nor armed revolution inspires leftist movements in most of Latin America. The Cuban revolution of 1959 inspired many in Latin America, but those who took up arms were defeated everywhere except in Nicaragua, where the Sandinistas, assailed by a counterrevolution supported by the United States, were eventually unseated in a democratic election. Most on the left now regard armed struggle as unfeasible; at the same time, they have embraced democracy and believe that it must include (while not being limited to) respect for democratic electoral processes. The guerrilla remnants in Colombia and Chiapas are exceptions to the demise of guerrilla struggle, but neither is seen as a model for most of the continent's left. Authoritarian military governments took power in many countries beginning in the 1970s (1964 in Brazil) and ceded power to civilians in the 1980s, usually through pacts that limited the scope of democratic government. During the same period, globalization of the world economy was reinforcing the subordination of Latin America to the advanced capitalist economies and to international financial institutions. Neoliberal economic policies—adopting fiscal discipline to contain inflation, privatizing state-owned firms, removing protections from private industries, and reorienting most economies to export—have led to massive job losses in the private and state sectors. By the 1990s it was clear that neoliberalism was not going to spark economic revival. But it has meant smaller workplaces and weakened legal protection, making it much harder to organize the working class. Ironically, these changes have occurred at the same time that political systems have returned from authoritarianism to formal democracy. Democratization was expected to make economic policy more responsive to popular demands, but its effect has been slight, due to the limitations imposed on the new democratic governments. Presidents remain unaccountable to their voters. In Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela, presidents were elected on platforms rejecting neoliberalism and austerity, but once in office implemented free-market austerity packages, disregarding the express wishes of the voters and their own campaign promises. And two and a half decades of neoliberalism have brought about an ideological reorientation. The belief that the state can act as the dynamic engine of social change is much diminished if it has not vanished entirely. Internationally, the collapse of the Soviet system has meant for some leftists the loss of the model they aspired to replicate; even those for whom it was not a model nevertheless saw it as a bulwark against the main enemy, the United States. In the 1990s the United States further strengthened its political and economic hegemony vis-á-vis its allies in the cold war alliance, and thereby its sway over the conservative governments of Latin America. All these changes produce a very different context for left political activity, one which precludes returning to the progressive programs which were attempted in the past. There is no question that any left government must find new ways to achieve its goals, even if these remain unchanged.

Openings for the Left

IN SPITE OF THESE DISCOURAGING CONDITIONS for leftist transformation, self-styled leftists have won presidential office in the first years of the twenty-first century. The causes of left electoral victories are particular to each country; commonly, the specific failings of predecessor governments created openings of which particular left forces have been able to take advantage. There is nevertheless a general common element: the failure of neoliberalism, now widely acknowledged. Neoliberalism promised that reforms would spur economic growth by calling forth massive

investment, including foreign investment, especially in export-oriented industries. That in turn would lead to growth of output and employment, and ultimately to an improvement in the income and standard of living of the population as a whole and a decrease in inequality. In fact, the opposite has occurred. With a shrinking state sector and losses in the private sector to global competition, neoliberalism has not generally produced sustained economic growth. It has not generated rising employment or incomes. Instead it has brought massive unemployment, falling real incomes, and (in most countries) tremendous increases in inequality. It has exposed the majority of the population to greater risk: workers have lost pensions, protection from arbitrary firing, and eligibility for medical care, benefits that workers—at least those in public employment or large formal-sector firms—had enjoyed during the ISI period. The modest revival of economic growth in the 1990s has produced benefits only for a very narrow slice at the top of the income distribution. Inequality has deepened as the employment and income prospects of the population as a whole have worsened. Though the basis for workers' collective action has been weakened dramatically, they have shown their rejection of neoliberalism in their votes for candidates with progressive platforms and promises of reductions in inequality. Beyond the failure of neoliberalism, the left has gained ground as it has transformed itself. Most left parties emerged from the authoritarian period resolved to defend democracy—in part because it seemed the only alternative, in part because both the submission to authoritarian rule and the experience of their own vanguardist movements led them to believe that adequate representation of the interest of the majority requires genuine democracy. Where the old left was uncomfortable with formal democracy, today's left has embraced it. As a result, they emphasize popular participation and citizenship. The flourishing of indigenous ethnic identity has also strengthened left formations, especially in the Andean countries. Other social movements too have proliferated, though unevenly, throughout Latin America, among informal sector workers as well as the more traditional women's and residence- based movements. Broad-based popular protests challenged authoritarian governments. Uprisings against privatization, austerity policies, cost of living increases, and structural reforms have regularly shaken country after country since the impact of neoliberalism was first felt in the 1980s. These movements have reached explosive dimensions in some countries, forcing the ouster of elected governments in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador (more than once in each country). The victory of these *pueblazos*or "popular coups," however, was usually short-lived, as successors to presidents unseated by popular uprisings in the 1990s generally moved rapidly to adopt the very austerity policies for which their predecessors were ousted. In the new century, popular movements have been more successful at imposing candidates of their own choice or forcing new elections in which their candidates rode to power. Whether social movements have been instrumental in putting these governments into office has been an important determinant of their adoption of progressive policies, as I will show below.

Economic Policies

IF THE LEFTIST SURGE is largely due to the electorates' repudiation of neoliberalism because of declining living standards, the first test of leftism in government must be the adoption of policies that will improve general well-being and the distribution of income and wealth. Economic conditions are relatively favorable: Latin America is enjoying stable, moderate growth, which allows a more flexible policy and improves the standard of living of the poorest. But the governments differ significantly in their willingness to take advantage of these conditions, and in the instruments chosen. All claim to pursue poverty reduction and equalization but some emphasize direct intervention while others rely on the workings of the market in a growing economy to distribute wealth and income more fairly. Some governments give equalization and social betterment high priority, while for others it remains subordinate to the demands of fiscal stability and integration into the world market. The fact that some self-styled leftist governments seek to alleviate poverty through market-oriented policies illustrates how deeply the neoliberal idea has penetrated the realm of social policy. *Venezuela*. The Chàvez government has adopted a policy of populist redistribution

based largely on oil revenues. Chàvez has had the good fortune to consolidate his power (after a failed coup attempt supported by the United States in 2002 and a 2004 recall referendum which he handily defeated) when the price of oil was skyrocketing. The national oil company PDVSA, while remaining state-owned, had been turned over to capitalist management, but Chàvez has reasserted political control and devoted a large share of the windfall revenues to social programs. In 2007 he went further, demanding to renegotiate contracts with foreign concession holders and retain a greater share of ownership for the government. The government has created a number of social projects, known as *misiones*, to provide health care, education, job training, housing and urban infrastructure in the massive shantytowns, and subsidized food. Typically, each neighborhood is served by a committee of local residents to organize the activities of the *misiòn*. There are also programs to stimulate production cooperatives and provide training and employment to the poor and unemployed. Twenty thousand Cuban doctors serve in primary-care clinics in poor barrios, in exchange for oil sold to Cuba at subsidized prices. Chàvez enjoys enormous personal popularity, concentrated in the poor barrios of the cities, especially Caracas, but extending to at least segments of the middle class whose interests have not been fundamentally challenged and who are also benefiting from the oil boom. That popularity has been ratified in a series of elections since he was first elected president in 1998, including congressional and municipal elections, referenda on constitutional amendments, the 2004 recall referendum, and finally his reelection in 2006. It has not yet been shown that the combination of oil-driven subsidies and political mobilization will support self- sustaining growth or lead to what Chàvez calls "socialism for the twenty-first century." Nevertheless, combined with a more progressive tax system, these programs do represent a promise not only of growth but of economic redistribution and political empowerment of the hitherto excluded. *Argentina.* In Argentina a long-brewing economic crisis came to a head at the end of 2001 and inaugurated a period of political turmoil which culminated in the election of Kirchner in 2003. The government of Peronist president Carlos Menem pegged the Argentine peso to the U.S. dollar in 1991, leaving no flexibility to respond to the Mexican and Asian currency crises, which set off the Argentine crisis and Menem's defeat by Fernando de la Rua in his 1999 bid for reelection. Under de la Rua the economy continued to deteriorate—GNP fell by 72 percent in 2001, and unemployment was above 20 percent. To stem inflation, de la Rua froze bank accounts in December, 2001. This move drove thousands into the streets in a new form of political protest, the *piquete* (roadblock), which brought the country to a halt for weeks. The popular slogan "*Que se vayan todos*" ("throw them all out") expressed the demonstrators' goal, and indeed, it appeared that they were succeeding: de la Rua resigned, followed in rapid succession by three provisional presidents in two weeks. Then a caretaker held office until the presidential election of 2003, in which Néstor Kirchner ran against fellow Peronist Menem. Menem was ahead in the first round, but without enough votes to claim victory. Seeing that he would certainly lose in the runoff, he withdrew. Kirchner has presided over a strong economic recovery, and among the new crop of leftist presidents, has been perhaps the most audacious, successfully negotiating with the International Monetary Fund a 70 percent reduction in Argentina's international debt. The social benefits made possible by the strong economy and reduction in debt service are mainly distributed through traditional Peronist party patronage. Kirchner's wife, Cristina Fernàndez de Kirchner, handily won election as his successor in October, 2007. *Bolivia*. The new presidential regime in Bolivia offers what is in many ways the most interesting case, even if its idiosyncrasies make it hard to classify. Bolivia is the Latin American country with proportionately the largest indigenous population, and it is the poorest country on the South American continent. The election of Evo Morales in December, 2005, followed immense popular uprisings protesting the threatened sell-off of natural resources to foreign investors—the "water war" in Cochabamba in 2000 and the "gas war" in 2003. Morales' election was an enormous breakthrough. He is not only the first indigenous president in Bolivia's history, but a coca farmer and leader of the *cocaleros*' movement, which for more than a decade has advocated the right of farmers to grow their traditional coca without interference from the U.S.-sponsored eradication program. He brought in an administration unlike any Bolivia has ever seen. The day before his

inauguration in January, 2006, wearing an ancient ceremonial costume, he participated in an indigenous healing ritual, televised, to demonstrate his embrace of his roots. Some saw this as mere theatrics, but the symbolism was matched by the appointment of indigenous people and representatives of popular movements to cabinet positions. He has confronted three big issues, control of natural gas reserves, agrarian reform, and election of a constituent assembly to reform the constitution and secure more adequate representation for the indigenous majority. His achievements, however, have been modest. His greatest success has been the renegotiation of natural gas contracts with the foreign firms that exploit the reserves, boosting the economy and driving government revenue up. The Constituent Assembly elected in July 2006 has been meeting but has been stalled because, while Morales's supporters won a majority, they lack the two thirds necessary to pass major amendments to the constitution. The heart of the opposition is the mostly European-descended population of the Department of Santa Cruz, which has promoted a secession movement. *Brazil*. Brazil is the country, and Luiz Inàcio Lula da Silva the president, that appeared to offer the greatest likelihood of a radical break when Lula was elected in 2002, in his fourth run for the presidency. A former factory worker, union official, and militant opponent of the military government, Lula was the main founder and leader of the Workers' Party (PT). But though the PT still officially claims to be socialist, Lula ran on a platform that essentially renounced its historic program, and embraced neoliberal capitalism, pledging in his 2002 campaign to maintain the neoliberal policies of his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and in particular to honor Brazil's international debt and the IMF's fiscal conditions. By some measures Brazil has the second highest inequality of income distribution in the world. Lula's main social welfare program, the Family Stipend *(Bolsa Famílía*) is a conditional cash transfer program, meaning that it is a means-tested benefit requiring compliance with behavioral obligations (such as children's school attendance). Conditional cash transfers are in high favor with the economic planners of the World Bank, because they are targeted to the most needy and require behavior that increases the human capital of the poor. These goals, worthy in themselves, nevertheless assume that economic growth requires changes in individual behavior rather than structural change. The *Bolsa Família* program is widely credited with having contributed significantly to Lula's reelection margin. In 2006 the geography of Lula's support shifted significantly to the poverty- stricken Northeast, while he lost ground in the PT's traditional strongholds, the South and Southeast. Lula's accommodation to the demands of the international market has encountered relatively little political opposition. Even a major corruption scandal implicating leading PT officials, revealed in 2005—the PT had bribed parliamentary deputies to win their votes for the governing coalition — apparently had little effect on the 2006 election. After falling short of a majority in the first round in 2006, he easily won the runoff with 62 percent of the vote. *Chile*. Two Socialist presidents, Bachelet and her predecessor Ricardo Lagos, have presided over significant economic growth in the Chilean economy, and have relied on that growth to improve the living standard of the population. But while poverty has declined, she has not done anything to reduce economic inequality, and in her campaign she promised (and has kept the promise) to respect the constitutional provisions guaranteeing the structural economic reforms dictated by neoliberalism. While moderates who support Lula and Bachelet argue that external constraints prevent them from taking bolder measures, the choices made by Chàvez and Kirchner show that the range of options is wider. Though far from revolutionary, they have stood up to international pressures and to their own domestic bourgeoisies rather than kowtowing to them. Their independence, moreover, has been a clear political asset.

Party vs. Movement?

A SECOND CRITERION OF LEFTISM is these governments' relation to social movements. The more leftist governments all in some measure owe their power to the social movements at their base: in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, social movements brought down predecessor governments; in Venezuela the outpouring of popular support in the streets was an important factor in Chàvez's

victory over the 2002 coup attempt. These governments, which have rejected the neoliberal economic program, have also responded to the movements' demands rather than exploiting their support and then reverting to the policies that sparked the protest, as many of their predecessors had done. Receptiveness to the demands of social movements is in inverse relation to the strength of parties. The regimes that are challenging the neoliberal consensus are all in some sense antiparty. In all these countries, the traditional party system is in disarray. The parties supporting the president are new or (in Argentina) divided, dominated by the leader; because the movements are intermittent and ephemeral, so is the leader's accountability to them. Lula and Bachelet, on the other hand, have a base in a well consolidated party (though each was elected by a coalition). The PT grew out of social movements that sustained democratic opposition through years of dictatorship, and parties making up the left wing of the Chilean *Concertaciòn*also mounted strong opposition to its dictatorship. But their electoral victories are due more to the broadening of support among middle sectors than to those movements, and incumbents have curtailed their parties' historically radical programs in part because they believe that that support depends on their moderation. In office they have continued the policies of their predecessors, either pledging to maintain them (in Chile) or carrying them out as the previous government was not able to (in Brazil). Chàvez has created the United Socialist Party of Venezuela and called on the parties that support him to join it. Several parties that have supported him resisted joining the new party. It is difficult to predict what will come of this reorganization. Chàvez has previously created party-like organizations, only to disregard them and retain a more direct, personal control over his movement—a control likely to be enhanced by the recently proposed constitutional amendment allowing unlimited reelection of presidents. Right now the strength of institutionalized parties seems to act as a brake on progressive policies, but it is a double-edged sword. The absence of strong parties and personal leadership by a charismatic figure can substitute for the democratic channeling of demands from below; it must also eventually raise a succession problem. Support from a heterogeneous collection of social movements, each pushing primarily for its own agenda and all subject to inevitable fluctuations in the level of mobilization. offers little guarantee of policy continuity in future administrations. And some social movements—though certainly not all—do not escape the influence of the neoliberal ideological reorientation prevailing in these societies, transforming themselves into formal nongovernmental organizations with professional staffs and seeking government subsidies to carry out their programs.

Leftist Internationalism

THE THIRD DIMENSION OF THE LEFTISM of Latin American governments consists of their international projection. Their international stances are inevitably conditioned by the long shadow of the looming colossus of the north. The question is, to what extent can left-leaning governments change their relations with the United States? Latin American countries currently enjoy more freedom to distance themselves from the United States than usual — because so many progressive governments have arisen simultaneously, and because the Bush administration has done so much to alienate them. The 2002 coup in Venezuela, warmly applauded by the United States until it was obvious that it had failed, was immediately condemned by the Organization of American States. Chile and Mexico, the two Latin American members of the UN Security Council in 2003, refused (with the majority of the Council) to authorize U.S. intervention in Iraq (and the Mexican government was in no sense a leftist government). The Bush administration has given low priority to Latin America, leaving the countries of the hemisphere to enjoy a sort of benign neglect. We can examine these countries' international behavior in three areas: trade, intrahemispheric relations among the Latin countries themselves, and rhetoric toward the United States. "Free" trade is the form imperialism has taken at the turn of the twenty-first century. Despite the Bush administration's push for a Free Trade Area of the Americas, a combination of popular pressure and government alliances has made it a dead letter, at least for now. Similarly, negotiations to expand the scope of

the World Trade Organization have stalled, largely due to Brazil's leadership of the Group of 22. Several leftist governments have promoted a Latin trading bloc free of U.S. hegemony, notably Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela. Chàvez proposed the creation of a southern free trade area, the "Bolivarian Alternative for America" (its Spanish acronym, ALBA, not only means "dawn" but contrasts with ALCA, the Spanish acronym for the FTAA.) Venezuela has also joined Mercosur, the Common Market of the Southern Cone, and, along with Brazil and Argentina, endorsed its expansion to cover all of South America. Chàvez has given substantial development aid to several countries of the region, both by purchasing their debt and by selling them oil at heavily discounted prices. He has further promoted hemispheric integration by proposing to build an oil pipeline to Argentina. But as the members have expanded Mercosur and tried to strengthen it, some have also tried to make side deals with the United States: Uruguay is attempting to negotiate a bilateral free trade treaty, and Brazil appears to want to do the same, confounding the efforts to which it contributed so strongly to derail the FTAA and contain the WTO. Chile has remained outside the emerging trade consensus, and is already a full member of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). There are other tensions in intra-Latin relations. Morales' renegotiation of Bolivian natural gas contracts affected the holdings of the Brazilian oil company Petrobras, and the Brazilian government protested. (The dispute was later resolved.) Argentina has protested Uruguay's construction of a paper mill which threatens to pollute the Uruguay River, which separates the two countries. Chàvez' overt support for presidential candidates in other countries, especially Peru, has been seen as unwelcome interference. Perhaps most important, Chàvez and Lula have been rivals for leadership as often as they have been partners in the pursuit of greater Latin American integration. Some governments are more conciliatory toward the United States than others. Chàvez is the most outspoken, embracing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, calling George W. Bush "Mr. Danger" (after the American villain of a well-known Venezuelan novel), and selling heating oil to community organizations in poor communities in the United States at generous discounts. He shadowed Bush on his March 2007 tour of Latin America, appearing in neighboring countries, to admiring throngs, at the same time that Bush was being protested in the countries he visited.[2]Chàvez has also announced Venezuela's withdrawal from the IMF and the World Bank. He has strong reason to be suspicious of U.S. intentions, because the Bush administration supported the coup of 2002, if it did not instigate it. But he is protected (at least so far) by U.S. dependence on the continuing flow of Venezuelan oil. Tension between Bolivia and the United States centers on coca cultivation. Because of coca's symbolic value in Bolivia's indigenous culture, Morales resists U.S. pressure for complete eradication. Anti-U.S. rhetoric is muted among the governments whose domestic economic policies have hewed more closely to the neoliberal line and that have entered (or are negotiating for) trade agreements with the United States. After the U.S.-backed coup in Haiti that drove out President Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004, Brazil and Argentina enlisted as leaders of MINUSTAH, the United Nations peacekeeping force. Brazil was the first, welcoming stop on Bush's 2007 tour of Latin America. Together with Brazil's discussion—however muted—of a bilateral free trade agreement, these are signs of the Brazilian government's effort to conciliate the United States. Governments that seek conciliation sometimes face the opposition of their own popular movements. Masses turned out to protest Bush at two major hemispheric summits, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Santiago, Chile, in 2004 and the Mar del Plata, Argentina, Summit of the Americas in 2005. While the host governments tried to contain the protests, they joined in opposing the Bush proposals and turned the meetings into diplomatic setbacks for the administration.

Conclusion

FROM THIS OVERVIEW, two salient conclusions stand out. First, the recent electoral successes of left-leaning candidates and parties are largely due to the economic conjuncture in which neoliberal economic policies of austerity, liberalization, and export orientation have accentuated poverty and inequality. Second, the "left" embraces a broad spectrum of political positions, and has offered a

variety of responses, some of them challenging the failed policies more forcefully than others. Mobilization against economic austerity does not automatically translate into sustained support for left programs. Opportunities for organization have declined: dispersed working and living conditions hinder mobilization. Old political parties are weakened or have gravitated to the center; the strongest parties have been the most moderate. The choice of a more progressive option depends on a leader with a strong personal following from a popular movement, but without a well- established organizational base. And even in the countries with more progressive leaders, the hegemony of neoliberal ideas is still strong enough to narrow options. In evaluating the left's political prospects, we face a paradox. On the one hand, these new governments—both the moderate and the more radical—have adopted policies which have measurably improved the living conditions of the victims of neoliberalism, especially the poorest. On the other hand, most of them have not undertaken nor proposed the structural transformations to sustain those gains — the moderates because they have accepted the domination of transnational capital and the institutions of the international economy, the more radical because, except when they have oil, they are not strong enough, and because their power is largely personal rather than institutional. This is not to gainsay the benefits that moderate progressive regimes have brought the people of Latin America. Some progress, however slight, has been made against inequality. None of these regimes will produce the exclusion and immiseration that their immediate predecessors brought. I have couched this argument in terms of evaluating what is and is not "left." Identifying leftist politicians, organizations, and programs is a convenient way to introduce comparisons between countries and with the past, in order to assess the possibilities of change. My real concern, however, is not to decide what label to apply but to determine whether these regimes offer viable political programs to overcome the subordination to which the people of Latin America are subject. We are called on to exercise pessimism of the intelligence and optimism of the will. My caution against placing too much hope in the potential these new regimes offer for political change weighs heavily, rather more than I would like, on the side of pessimism. While we welcome the changes these new regimes have introduced, we should not overestimate them.

Footnotes

I appreciate the helpful comments of Lynn Chancer, Laura Kramer, and Karsten Struhl.

1. In this article I will focus on the elected presidents. Some of the same forces were responsible for the close call in Mexico and the less close but still significant showing in Peru, but in the zero-sum game of electoral victory, it is the winners who will influence the course of events. I will pay most attention to the larger countries, saying little about Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay.
2. Bush's tour was billed as a "We Care" tour, but as the residents of New Orleans and the U.S. veterans seeking medical care know, when the Bush administration announced that it cares, one can be sure that it doesn't.