

Making Sense of Latin America's "Third Left"

EMIR SADER EMBODIES, to the extent any one person can, the trajectory of Latin America's left movements. A Marxist sociologist with a long track record of studying Latin American politics, currently Executive Secretary of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), Sader is Brazilian by birth but fled Brazil at the end of the 1960s as the dictatorship tightened its grip. In Chile, he then participated in the electoral path to socialism preached by Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government, until the 1973 coup forced him to flee again. He then worked in Cuba with a government that had come to power through guerrilla war and urban insurgency. Finally, he returned to Brazil, where Workers' Party President Lula da Silva, the principal thorn in the side of the rich countries in the World Trade Organization and the Free Trade Area of the Americas, has proclaimed "Zero Hunger" to be his primary goal, but has followed neoliberal-inspired budget-balancing that precluded the burst of growth so many of his supporters hoped for. When Emir Sader speaks about the future of Latin America, it is worth listening. So what is he saying? "The old strategies of reforms promoted by Latin America's lefts have been left behind. Same thing with guerilla warfare. Resistance struggles against neoliberalism, by moving from social to political struggle, have forged a new strategy for the left of the continent... It would be difficult for this post-neoliberalism to become socialist, but it definitely can and should be anti-capitalist."¹ As Sader argues, the left in Latin America is treading new ground. In describing what is new about today's Latin American left, the easiest thing may be contrasting it with the "old" left approaches that have dominated for the last five decades. One such approach was the armed guerilla movements, inspired by the Cuban revolution, but now largely extinct (with Colombia

as the main exception). The other was the mass populist movements linked by patronage or party discipline to left or center-left electoral parties. While the *guerrilleros* have declined, left parties much like the traditional ones, far from disappearing, have surged in the last several years across much of Latin America. Both of these lefts have helped make positive changes in Latin America—challenging inequality, attacking illiteracy, improving services to the poor, redistributing land, and mobilizing ordinary people to defend their rights. But neither has had a strong tradition of bottom-up organizing. The military model at the core of the guerilla insurgencies and the model of charismatic leadership at the core of electoral leftism are centralized, top-down models—structures that can represent the interests of poor majorities, but usually without directly involving them in the decisions that affect their lives. But amidst the revival of familiar strains of left populism, there is a third left stirring in Latin America. Like the other two, it makes demands for economic justice and human rights. But even more centrally, it strives for the transformation of people—“self-management, independent thought, and self-construction,” in the words of social psychologist Maiqui Pixton, who works with housing cooperatives in Buenos Aires. The third left avows autonomy from the state rather than pursuing state power and promotes bottom-up decision-making. Latin America’s third left has received far less attention in Northern media than the first two. But its accomplishments—and the difficult choices it faces—hold important lessons for those of us in the North trying to create and sustain progressive movements within hostile policy environments.

The Incredible Shrinking State and the Rise of Autonomy

THE BOUNDARIES OF THIS THIRD LEFT are debatable. We would definitely include Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), Argentina’s *autonomista* current of workplace and community

organizations, Mexico's Zapatista movement, and the Federation of Neighborhood Councils (FEJUVE) in the indigenous metropolis of El Alto, Bolivia (next door to La Paz), a grassroots community organization at the center of the strikes and protests that brought down two governments and carried Evo Morales to power. (Some other Bolivian organizations have a similar flavor, as Nancy Romer explains in her article in this issue.)² But beyond these high profile examples, the political current includes varied other groups in just about every country in Latin America. The military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes that dominated the region in the 1980s have given way to competitive elections and relative freedom to dissent (again, Colombia is the key exception). At the same time, U.S.-backed neoliberal policies of free trade, balanced budgets, privatization, and reduced government intervention in the economy continue to fuel the "incredible shrinking state." (A current exception is Venezuela, where oil wealth is allowing a left government to expand the state.) The two older lefts emphasized making demands on the state with the goal of taking it over. But in the context of states with shrunken capacity, this approach falls short. The third left instead pursues autonomy – still making demands on the state, but with much more focus on organizing people to do things for themselves. This includes economic, political, and cultural autonomy. In the economic sphere, MST settlements in Brazil farm previously unused agricultural land they have occupied. In Argentina workers take over and run bankrupt enterprises. Mexico's Zapatistas carry out subsistence agriculture as well as producing fair trade coffee and indigenous crafts for sale. The Bolivian FEJUVE neighborhood councils pool community resources to purchase land and install infrastructure, and regulate the buying and selling of land and homes. All seek to link scattered productive projects into a broader "social economy" prioritizing human needs rather than profits. In many cases, environmental sustainability is part of the package: for example, many MST settlements are successful models of

organic and agro-ecological production and in 2005, along with La Via Campesina (an organization that brings together movements involved in the struggle for land from all over the world), the MST established the Latin American School of Agroecology which will graduate its first class this year. Political autonomy means independence from the state and political parties. The degree of independence varies. As Lula wound up his successful 2002 run for the presidency, MST organizer Jonas da Silva in 2002 told us, "We are critical of Lula, but we're campaigning for him. What matters is not the election, but democratizing the media and breaking up the large land-holdings." When Lula won, the MST challenged him with an accelerated program of land occupations. Similarly, in Bolivia and Argentina, third left organizations have generally supported Morales and Nestor and now Cristina Kirchner, but have not let up on making independent criticisms and demands. In contrast, the Zapatistas declined to support center-left populist Andrés Manuel Lòpez Obrador in the recently concluded Mexican presidential elections, arguing that his program simply put a kinder face on a brutal system. The MST demands government funding to buy agricultural inputs and create community infrastructure; FEJUVE likewise presses the government for financial assistance for community development—including joining the successful struggle to establish a public university in El Alto. On the other hand, the Zapatistas refuse all government aid (instead "taxing" the government and NGOs for projects they carry out on Zapatista turf)—though they led the long and (so far) unsuccessful struggle for legislation guaranteeing stronger rights for Mexican indigenous people to control their land, resources, and lives. Other organizations walk a fine line: for example, Argentina's Unemployed Workers' Movement (MTD) of La Matanza seeks government funds for projects, but refuses the patronage-linked welfare checks that have "destroyed many organizations," in the words of activist Soledad (who prefers to be identified only by her first name). All of these organizations couple building broad alliances with maintaining

independent politics, including the right to criticize any party as well as the state itself. To build cultural autonomy, Latin America's third left places enormous emphasis on education. The MST and the Zapatistas both take over the schools in their communities, train their own teachers, and implement their own curriculum. *Autonomista* workplace and community organizations in Argentina typically require members to take classes in principles of cooperativism, and quite a few of the worker-run businesses host adult education classes and community cultural centers. Activists from Haiti to Chile use low-powered, local FM radio stations to promote discussions about social justice and give voice to the voiceless.

Bottom-up Decision-Making

IN ADDITION TO AUTONOMY, the other axis of Latin America's new left is *horizontalidad*, a word that translates rather poorly as "horizontality"—in contrast with the top-down *verticalismo* that continues to characterize much left activity in Latin America (and elsewhere). This means "having everybody decide," says Argentine social psychologist/activist Pixton. The specifics vary. The Zapatistas use village-wide meetings to decide local issues, rotate regional leaders, and use intensive consultation to reach movement-wide decisions. The MST uses a more traditional set of pyramidal elected councils (with some less traditional aspects, such as mandating an equal number of women and men representatives at every level). Argentina's worker-run companies typically combine frequent workplace-wide assemblies with an elected management council that has executive powers. Housing cooperatives in Argentina bring together coop members and skilled professionals (architects, psychologists, and others) in participatory design and planning. But in every case these organizations are committed to broad participation, bottom-up decision-making, and transparent governance. This is participatory planning in practice, with plenty of imperfections but a genuine effort to

shift power downward, and a goal of empowering people to move beyond the immediate project to tackle other issues in their lives. Again, education is a key ingredient: activists seek to give people the tools to participate meaningfully—to break dependency and transform themselves into decision-makers. *Horizontalidad* is an ongoing experiment. Soledad, of MTD of La Matanza, recounted, “When a small group of us was dreaming about a community center, we had a lot of prejudices. We doubted that the community would accept the values and principles that we had agreed on. But we were wrong—the community was able to contribute.” She laughed, “When we formed the ‘educational community’ to govern our day care center, we feared that the parents wouldn’t speak up. The other day, one of the mothers said, ‘Now, you can’t get us to shut up, can you?’” Autonomy and *horizontalidad* complement each other. Fewer strings leading to the economic and political centers of power means more room for input from people at the base. On the flip side, autonomy is a hard road, and mass participation increases the chance of success. “None of us alone is as good as all of us together,” declared Soledad, quoting a movement slogan.

Three Options Within the Third Left

LATIN AMERICA’S THIRD LEFT is not consistently rooted in the proletariat, nor in the established peasantry that provided the support base for many guerrilla insurgencies. Reflecting the fracturing and displacing effect that neoliberalism has exerted all over Latin America, it draws its energy from constituencies that historically did not capture much left attention but now represent widespread experiences throughout the region: laid-off workers in Argentina, displaced-peasants-become-slum-dwellers in Brazil, miners and *campesinos* driven from the Altaplano in Bolivia as a result of Bolivia’s neoliberal structural adjustment policies, indigenous communities left on the margins of development in Chiapas (home turf of the Zapatistas), and so on. By the same token,

this left current's political strategies vary widely, with neither the benefit nor the limitation of a numbered International to provide guidance, with varied class roots, and building on diverse local traditions in a context of decentralization and local autonomy. Reacting to the World Social Forum's slogan that "Another world is possible," the Zapatistas called for "A world within which many worlds will fit." Within this range of variation, new movements on Latin America's left have taken three political directions. First, some have gravitated toward the more totalizing visions of the *guerrilleros* and the traditional left parties—seeking to solidify unity in action by subordinating autonomous movements to a single ideology and organization, often with a goal of pushing the state or contending for state power (or consolidating state power after an electoral victory). Venezuela's Bolivarian left has some of this tendency, as documented in the interview with Orlando Chirino in this issue. "Venezuela has a politically mobilized population, but it is a population that has been mobilized by [President Hugo] Chávez himself," remarks left Venezuelan historian Margarita López Maya.³ A second thrust has been withdrawal from national politics as such, deepening autonomy but limiting impact. When we asked a rank-and-file Maya activist of the Zapatista movement why the Zapatistas so rarely take part in broader alliances, his answer made it clear that for him the word *alianza* was a negative one connoting back-scratching politics. Emir Sader noted the limits of the "*Que se vayan todos!*" ("All of them [politicians] must go!") slogan of the the *piqueteros* (unemployed movement) and other dissidents in Argentina. "Faced with the election [of 1995], their main slogan was '*que se vayan todos,*'" he observed. "Well, 'they' did not leave, and the movements ran the risk of getting Menem"—the Peronist president who brought neoliberalism to Argentina, and who was indeed re-elected in 1995. The third option, which we find the most promising, is to maintain a creative tension between attempts to build national-level power in order to influence

or—in increasing numbers of cases—manage the state, and a continuing commitment to autonomy and participation. This describes the tense but productive relationships between the MST and Lula da Silva, or between Argentina’s recuperated business movement (in which workers form cooperatives and take over shuttered businesses) and outgoing President Nestor Kirchner. Bolivia’s vice president, Alvaro García Linera, distanced himself from a centralizing model when he recently declared, “We as a government do not seek to lead the social movements, we seek to be led by them.”⁴ Conversely, when we commented to Lee Young-soo of the Korean Peasants League, which has a close working relationship with Brazil’s MST, that the MST keeps its distance from state power, he smiled and replied, “The MST wants to take part in running the state in Brazil—they just want to take part in building and running a different state.” In actuality, even in instances where third left movements have shifted in one of the first two directions, a productive tension persists. Hugo Chávez’s drive for a single, unified socialist party is tempered by the presence of supportive but often critical independent organizations: “The fragmented social movements that predate Chávez have not abandoned their existing structures,” reports Venezuela-based journalist Jonah Gindin.⁵ And though the Zapatistas passed on supporting a candidate in Mexico’s 2006 presidential election, they took the occasion to launch the Other Campaign, an attempt (still continuing) to build a broad-dare we say it?—alliance “from the left and below” across Mexico.

Lessons for the North

IS THE IDEA OF TRANSFERRING some of this third left energy to Northern countries such as the United States just a pipe dream? In fact, many of the ingredients are present in the North as well. Traditions of autonomy and participation in the United States extend back to early cooperative movements and

the New England town meeting. These traditions enjoyed a revival in the 1960s and 1970s in settings ranging from food coops to the black liberation movement, and activists and organizations with roots in that seedbed are still around. The U.S. anti-globalization movement in its many forms has made autonomy and participation its watchwords.⁶ We may not have laws that endorse expropriation of land or factories not being put to productive use, as in Brazil and Argentina, but eminent domain laws—the tool the government used to displace tens of thousands of poor people from suddenly valuable land in the urban renewal program of the 60s and 70s and again much under attack recently for misuse on behalf of large corporations and developers—embody the principle that the public can take property for the social good. And one hidden asset is millions of Latin American immigrants who have been exposed to the third left in their home countries. Indeed, faced with neoliberal federal and state governments rolling back many of the gains of the 1930s and 1960s waves of reform, new experiments are sprouting. Local groups are pushing participatory planning and budgeting. Community-supported agriculture projects promote local food self-sufficiency, and consumer and worker cooperatives pursue self-management. Neighborhoods declare themselves “empowerment zones” without funds from the federal government, and community organizations fight for “moral site control” in a way that echoes Latin American land takeovers. If we want these initiatives to survive and spread, we should build stronger ties of communication, learning, and solidarity with Latin America’s third left.

Footnotes

An earlier and shorter version of this article appeared in *Progressive Planning* magazine in 2006.

1. Luis Hernández Navarro, “El posneoliberalismo será

- anticapitalista, no socialista,” Interview with Emir Sader. *La Jornada* (Mexico City), October 12, 2007, p.7.
2. Our analysis of FEJUVE is based primarily on Emily Achtenberg, “Community organizing and rebellion: Neighborhood Councils in El Alto, Bolivia,” *Progressive Planning*, Spring 2007. Our analysis of the MST, the Argentinean *autonomista* movements, and the Zapatista movements, are primarily based on visits and interviews with movement activists and others in 2002, 2005, and 2006, respectively. See: Marie Kennedy and Chris Tilly, “Dancing to a different samba: Brazil’s grassroots groups look beyond the election,” *Dollars and Sense*, September-October 2002; “Participatory democracy: Argentinean grassroots movements at the crossroads,” *Z Magazine*, October 2005; “Chiapas: Counter-campaigns and autonomous communities – The Zapatistas’ new fight,” *Against the Current*, July/August 2006. We thank Grassroots International for their assistance in making contact with some of these movements.
 3. Fred Rosen. “Breaking with the past: A 40th anniversary conversation with Margarita Lòpez Maya.,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol.40, No.3, May/June 2007.
 4. Speech at the Latin American Studies Association, Montreal, September 6, 2007.
 5. Jonah Gindin. “Chavistas in the halls of power, Chavistas on the street.” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol.38, No.5, March 2005.
 6. Amory Starr and Jason Adams. “Anti-globalization: The global fight for local autonomy,” *New Political Science* Vol.25, No.1, 2003.